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AN INCOMPLEAT ETONIAN

FRANK DANBY

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With the author's
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1909

AN INCOMPLEAT ETONIAN

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AN INCOMPLEAT ETONIAN

By FRANK DANBY : *Author of* "THE HEART OF A CHILD," "PIGS IN CLOVER," "BACCARAT," "DR. PHILLIPS," "A BABE IN BOHEMIA," ETC.

Thos. H. Vale

"For love, than wisdom, is more deeply wise"



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To the memory of

ARTHUR FRANKAU

Whose son has inherited
his fine spirit.
On the grave of the dead father,
at the feet of the living son,
I lay my tribute.

FRANK DANBY

Mr. T. R. VALE,
MORDEN RD., [illegible]FORD.
BIRMINGHAM.

AN INCOMPLEAT ETONIAN

CHAPTER I

DAVID slept badly. For this, the winter cough that had irritated his wife's sensitiveness even in the first year of their marriage, was probably responsible. Vanessa always asserted that he was asthmatic, and certainly he was short of breath. Although he was habitually an insomniac, to-night he had woken with a start, suddenly, as if from some external cause. He lay still for a few moments, his heart beating quickly, his pulses throbbing. What had startled him, how had he been roused?

He opened his eyes. Darkness was in the room, and quiet. He occupied the back room on the second floor; the blinds were drawn, the outlook was on to the mews. Perhaps Dr. Gifford's brougham, unusually late, had driven its noisy way over the cobbled stones. But in that case he would hear the clink of harness, the rattle of unsteady hoofs, voices in the yard. He listened, but outside all was still. The big Harley Street house had been built in the Georgian era, the walls were thick, and it was silence they seemed to hold. Black night alone filled the room, and stillness. He shrank a little from both, lying there, hearing his own heartbeats, hearing nothing else, at first.

Was it Vanessa, coming up to bed, slamming

not got on a dressing-gown, why he had not combed his hair, if that was a corn on his foot? He was filled with curiosity on every conceivable topic, dumb as to what had made him cry. David had no gift of obtaining confidence.

Sebastian would not let him go; it was obvious he did not want to be alone in the dark. He made his father lift him out of bed presently, take him on his knee, tell him stories.

This was the way Vanessa found them when she came upstairs, hand tired, and brain weary, having written herself out.

She was startled at seeing a light in the boy's room; she saw it under the chink in the door, and it quickened her step. She turned the handle quite as anxiously as David had done; the boy was as much hers as his—more, she thought. It gave her a quick, unrecognised pain to see her husband sitting by the bedside, holding her boy in his arms. Sebastian was growing sleepy again; his trouble had been soothed, his head was on his father's shoulder, and David was nursing him tenderly.

But the quick, unrecognised pain in Vanessa's heart, the jealousy that stung her, made her reckless of his drowsiness.

"You might have seen the quilt was properly round him," she said, sharply. "What is the matter? Why did you not call me?"

And she knew she was unjust even while she spoke. For had she not insisted she must be undisturbed when writing? And David had taken the eiderdown from the bed and enwrapped the boy. One little foot hung down uncovered, but the boy was warm against his father's breast. He opened drowsy eyes at his mother's entry:

"I cwied in my sleep," he said; "it was your fault. You said it was England, and about 'all

the swallows.' And they was only sparrows, and houses; there was no blossoms, nor dewdrops, nor nothing." He was half asleep again.

"What is he talking about?" said David. "Hush! hush!" He soothed, and rocked him, to and fro, as if he had been still a baby.

It was characteristic of Vanessa that she did not offer to take him, although she stooped and adjusted the quilt, covering the little foot carefully. Her heart-beats were accelerated at the child's words, and her eyes triumphant. How wonderful he was! How quickly she understood him! His father was quite outside his mind.

"I am afraid he is not well; he feels a little feverish. Don't you think I'd better put my things on, and go for Gifford?" David asked anxiously, although already the boy's eyes were closed again, and his breathing was soft and regular.

What was the good of trying to make David understand? Her own heart beat high with pride, partly in the boy, partly in her own quick comprehension of him.

She stood in the room, nothing obviously literary about her, and still less of the maternal; a slim and graceful figure, gowned for the ballroom, and not for the study. Vanessa always said she wrote best in evening dress. She had been absorbed in her pen puppets for hours, these two belongings of hers, husband and son, more shadowy and unreal than the figures she created. But when she dreamed, in days when her pen lay idle, Sebastian was ever the centre of her dreaming: it was only in her working hours that she escaped him. Now she said, with that light in her eyes:

"He is quite right, it is my fault. This afternoon I found him, curled up in the window-seat in the dining-room, gazing out of the window, with a book in his hand. He asked me, 'Is this

England, Mumsy?' I did not pause to think what his query might mean; I am on my last chapter, and it is difficult to find the tag. I was absorbed in my closing scene, careless of anything else. I answered quickly, 'Yes, of course this is England. I thought you knew London was the capital of England, the centre of the world.' It comes back to me now that he seemed distressed, puzzled, unsatisfied."

"I don't understand . . ."

"Of course not."

He winced at that. She had not meant to hurt him.

"I mean, it is difficult; he is so wonderful, so unusual. I went into the dining-room just now. I picked up this book—look!" She held it out to David, open. But he would not take it, nor move, for fear of rousing the boy.

"Oh! to be in England
Now that April's there!
And whoever wakes in England
Sees some morning unaware
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf . . ."

She broke off abruptly, her voice had grown low, almost unsteady.

"He had been reading it to himself. It comes back to me now that his eyes were wet. And I failed him! I did not follow the working of his mind, the disappointment of his eyes, gazing on the grey street."

"And after April, when May follows
And the whitethrush builds, and all the swallows . . ."

"He must have felt it all so intensely, so ex-

quisitely, and I, I ought to have known. . . . I am not fit to mother him."

She looked down on the little fellow, fast asleep now in his father's arms.

"If only my father had been alive!"

It broke from her involuntarily, it was heartfelt.

"It is so rare and fine a mind! My father, too, never read that poem without emotion. I put it in Sebastian's hands on purpose to test him, and then forgot all about it; fool that I am!"

"I don't think his brain ought to be excited."

"Try a thousand other children with it," she exclaimed, triumphantly.

David only sighed, he did not argue. It ached in him that she still missed her father, longed for his sympathy. David, too, knew Sebastian was different from all other children. He had once read "Little Red Riding Hood" to him, and this when he was in his fifth year. And it was an experience he had never forgotten, for Sebastian almost had convulsions over the end, and had cried himself sick, although all the household, mother, father and doctor, had assured him of Red Riding Hood's final safety. David had never hurt Sebastian's sensitiveness again, and he never would. Vanessa was wrong in thinking he failed to recognise it.

David was moved, nevertheless, after this incident, to consult Dr. Gifford as to the best course to pursue with regard to Sebastian's education. The boy slept well the remainder of the night, and had apparently forgotten all about his disappointment in the morning. Vanessa would have liked to recall it to him, and to discuss the source of his rare tears. But she, too, was not sure of the right course. She asked the boy, casually, if he were going to read the same book to-day as he read yesterday, and he replied, quite indifferently,

that he wasn't going to read to-day, he was going to play horses. She purposely left the book in his way, but he did not take it up. Whilst she was making her experiments, David got Dr. Gifford to give an opinion.

"Send him to boarding school, let him mix with other boys." Dr. Gifford was quite decisive. "I quite admit that he is not an ordinary boy. How should he be, with such parentage?" This was a sop to Vanessa, for Dr. Gifford was genuinely interested, and wanted to carry his point. "But the nearer you approximate him to the normal, the better chance you give him of health and happiness. He is not yet nine years old. You give him Browning to read, and Madam, here, is revelling in the fact that he cries at night because he can't see the "blossomed pear tree," in Harley Street! He ought to be playing cricket, hockey, football, shirking his lessons, and barking his shins. That's the way to make a man of him."

"I do not want him to be like other boys," Vanessa objected.

"You need not fear that," the doctor answered, drily. She was always a little outside his sympathies. He was by no means a narrow-minded man, but Vanessa's seriousness over her books, her father's reputation, and literature generally, seemed to him exotic, perhaps a trifle ridiculous. She had a husband, a home and a baby—what more did a young woman need? He did not realise that she had needed none of these things at eighteen years of age, and had not been trained for them. They were accidental to her, external, and she had not yet grown used to them. Her slow development was on other lines, and no maturity of womanhood, knowledge, or suffering was yet hers.

Sebastian was sent to boarding school in his ninth year, where, in a phenomenally short time,

he rose to be head of his class, and presently, of every class.

His individuality survived the ordeal. Like his mother, he took little colour from his surroundings. What happiness he achieved was intrinsic, and it did not include the popularity that accrued to athletic boys with meaner brain power. But that he did not enjoy his life at the preparatory school can be read in his letters to David, which were carefully preserved, and of which the following is a fair sample. It was written in his eleventh year. David had typhoid fever, and the boy received fewer visits from his parents in consequence.

ST. MICHAEL'S, *November 25th.*

"DEAR PUPSY,—I am very glad to hear you are steadily improving. I am getting on all right and am well and jolly. How is Mumsy, Aunt Stella and Bice? Thank Mumsy for her letter which I received this morning. I am so lonely that I don't know what I should do without yours and Mumsy's letters, but I know that it would do you harm to come down, and I don't want Mumsy to leave you all alone, so I will wait patiently for the end of the term to come, which is exactly three weeks on *Wednesday*, and trials begin Saturday week.

P.T.O.

"I was two from top this week, but I am determined to do better this time, and as I have begun well, I am in great hopes.

"We played Becenham the 2nd best preparatory school this week and were only beaten 3—1.

"In a second XI match *v.* South Eastern Junior we beat 1—0.

"In a third XI *v.* Campbells we beat 5—2.

"Good-bye.

"Your loving son, SEBASTIAN.

"P.S.—Don't let Mumsy leave you to come and see me."

In his thirteenth year Sebastian went to Eton. The position of affairs between his parents had not improved, but of this, naturally, he knew nothing. Vanessa's reputation as a novelist had by this time become established, but as hers was never a renowned success, as she never rivalled Marie Corelli, nor Hall Caine, and was as yet unknown on the sixpenny bookstalls, the boy gained no kudos among his companions for being her son.

CHAPTER II

"GAME and set, and match to me," said Sebastian scoffingly, pitching his racquet on to the springless sofa. "I told you I could give you forty. You haven't a chance at the odds, you haven't got the temper for the game. Look at you now!"

She had flung all her ill-directed energies into the last stroke, and the little volatile ball had gone half a yard beyond the table, leaped into the fireplace, jumped, and finally disappeared under the bookcase.

The girl's face was scarlet with rage, her black eyes flashed, she stamped her feet at him.

"You needn't stand there, jeering and grinning! Don't grin, I say, don't! don't!"

"All right, all right! Abuse me because you can't play ping-pong."

"Can't play? I *can* play! You know you cheated!"

"What a silly lie! Just like a girl!"

She burst into sudden tears.

"Any way, you are a rude, a rude, beastly boy, and I hate the sight of you!"

"Very well, then, I'll go. Mind, I shan't get round the corner before you are running, full speed, after me, begging me to come back."

"I shan't! You know I shan't I never want to see you again. You're a prig, and I hate you!"

"Not you, no such luck! You can't live with out me."

She dried her eyes, on a handkerchief that had seen better days, and sniffed defiance at him.

"Well, you are glad enough to come here, anyhow."

"You don't suppose I come to see you, do you?

"You come to see Pleasey, but she wouldn't even stop at home to meet you this afternoon! She knew you were coming—I told her myself; so there! And *she* says you are a prig, too. Everybody says you are!"

He coloured at that. There was no doubt it was Pleasey Pleyden-Carr he came to see, and not his sixteen-year-old cousin. Beatrice Ashton was too impulsive, passionate, untutored and crude, to suit the taste of an Eton boy, already in the first hundred, and displaying fancy waistcoats. He played ping-pong with Beatrice because he had nothing better to do. But the dull back schoolroom in Weymouth Street showed itself to him in all its unrelieved and monotonous ugliness when there was only Bice to set off its bareness with her ill-temper.

Sebastian sometimes wondered vaguely at the difference of Aunt Stella's own surroundings, and those with which she was satisfied for her only daughter. For the drawing-room was hung with water-colours and silken draperies, luxurious with lounges, easy chairs and femininenes. The schoolroom was half of the dining-room, shut off from it by folding doors. On the other side was the inlaid, and beautiful, Sheraton sideboard; here was only the rickety sofa, banished from some more luxurious place. The carpet was shabby, the deal table, with painted mahogany legs, might have been translated from the kitchen; the window, of coloured glass, looked on to the yard. There were shelves with broken-backed books, a small piano in walnut case, a litter of music on the floor, an ink-stained oak writing-table with untidy papers.

But Aunt Stella was altogether too contradictory,

puzzling, and complicated for Sebastian to understand. He accepted her, as other people did, without explanation, on her merits, her idle good humour, and plea of indifferent health.

The ping-pong had been a failure this afternoon. Beatrice hated being beaten, and Sebastian beat her so easily. He gave her thirty, and owed thirty, and still beat her. At Queen's College, in the various examinations there, and at Burlington House, Beatrice Ashton excelled her schoolfellows, was conscious of her abilities, and had the reward of them. But the aggravation of her life, its excitement and poignancy, was her cousin Sebastian's calm superiority.

"You came to see Pleasey," Beatrice went on, for she had noted the sudden flush on the boy's pale face, and was glad, in her rage at his ping-pong victory over her, to know she could touch him. She jeered:

"You are in love with Pleasey! *In love*, stupid! She isn't in love with you, she likes me ever so much better. I asked her, and she promised me she did. She is only nice to you because you are my cousin. And she likes Aunt Vanessa's books. She says you are only a boy."

Excepting for that little flush, it was impossible to see that Sebastian had been moved at all by her words. He prided himself on his self-control.

Beatrice's dark eyes had had no difficulty in detecting glances between her cherished boy cousin, and her new companion-governess. She knew Sebastian and Miss Pleyden-Carr had become friends in the Easter holidays. Bice had been cruelly jealous and unhappy about it. Her nature was generous, her temper passionate, her love for her cousin, although it was, as yet, but a child's love, was overwhelming. And it brought her little but suffering. Sebastian, sensitive himself, could play

on her sensitiveness as if it were a violin, and she vibrated to every touch his humour devised.

Beatrice had manœuvred to give Pleasey her holiday this afternoon. She had determined on monopolising Sebastian's mid-half leave. His look of disappointment round the empty schoolroom had enraged her; and she had tried to enrage him. In the game, too, she had played badly, had not done herself justice, hitting the balls wildly, and losing the two sets.

Now, when they had finished their game, and he stood with his back to the empty fireplace, she could not help trying to break through his self-possession.

"She thinks you are only a boy. I told her you were sixteen, though you said you were seventeen."

He retained his self-possession.

"I *am* seventeen; I am eighteen months older than you are, and eighteen years wiser. You are not a human being at all; you are an irresponsible person—rather mad. I *should never* be surprised to see you come to a bad end. 'Great wits to madness often are allied.' Mine are the great wits, yours——"

"Well, I am not mad enough to fall in love, *in love*." It is impossible to exaggerate her scorn at such a state of affairs. "She says you are ugly too. There!"

"Oh, of course, she confides entirely in you!"

"I don't care whether she confides in me, I didn't say she confided in me." She stamped her foot at him. "I know what she thinks, I see all her letters, she tells me everything."

"Then you should have the tact and discretion to keep it to yourself."

"Prig!"

"But there, I am tired of trying to teach you to behave yourself. Perhaps I shall find you improved

by midsummer." He took his carefully brushed high hat from the mantelpiece.

Bice made a rush at him—at the hat.

"You shan't go! You shan't!"

He held it up, out of her reach: he was nearly a foot taller than she, and this was another grievance.

"I *am* going."

She got between him and the door, and put her back against it. He placed his hat on his head, he was very deliberate in his ways. Then he took her, not roughly, but firmly, by the two elbows, and with a dexterous movement jerked her away from the door, was outside, and had turned the key.

She flung herself against the door, and burst into a sudden cry, she shrieked and stamped, and shook the handle.

"I hate you! I hate you! Come back, Sebastian! You are to come back; you are to; you are to!"

But she heard his retreating footsteps, and threw herself on the floor, beating it with her head and feet, being altogether childish, hysterical and absurd as she lay alone in that dull, empty schoolroom. She was fifteen years old, freakishly small, with elf locks, gipsy complexion, strangely unlike her delicate, fair mother, a throw-back to some early type of Ventom, when the woods sufficed them.

Sebastian's mother, and Beatrice's mother, were twin sisters. Fate had played them many strange and untoward tricks, but it had given them each other as compensation. They had never been separated. As children they had slept in each other's arms, whispered their baby confidences, chattered their baby talk. They had shared each other's rooms as grown girls, and still the confidences and intimate talk had gone on, the inevitable moment of reserve delayed, until Stella met Jack Ashton.

The complete confidence between the two sisters ended on their wedding day. For Jack Ashton was a rake, David Rendall a saint, and neither sister well mated. They learned their silences, although no distance separated them.

Within a few doors of one lived always the other, and their children, each a solitary and unique bud on the parent stalk, seemed to them born only to carry on the tradition of their complete intimacy.

Sebastian would not leave the house, after his quarrel with Beatrice, without a farewell to his aunt. He went upstairs to the pretty drawing-room, and found Stella sitting, as usual, surrounded by flowers; Maréchal Niel roses, although it was April, lilies of the valley, tall palms, and broad dishes of Neapolitan violets. He found her in a charming tea-gown, and still more charming mood, pouring out tea for his mother.

"Is that you, Sebastian? Come in. How is Eton? Well, what have you done wonderful this term? Are you Captain of the Boats? And have you beaten Dr. Warre in Greek verse? Here is your mother, dying to know what new worlds you have conquered."

It was characteristic of the relations between Vanessa Rendall and her son, that although it was a month since they had met, they only greeted each other with a nod. Also, that, although she knew that he was coming this afternoon, she had not waited at home to receive him. She always had tea with Stella on Saturday afternoons! Both sisters lived in an unuttered, perpetual, fear lest they should hurt each other by displaying an affection for their children. Vanessa would not give up coming to tea with Stella, although this was Sebastian's long leave, and the clever stripling held all of her heart that was as yet developed.

"Where is my Bice? What have you done

with my little Bice ? " asked Stella. " Have some tea ? "

" I thought I should find you here, mater."

They had only nodded to each other, but there was intimacy and understanding in that nod.

" Yes, I will have some tea, Aunt Stella. Eton ? Well, Eton's just as it always was, a beastly, unhealthy hole, inhabited by aborigines. It is a bear garden, I shall be very glad when my time is up."

" Have you made up your mind about the Harvey ? " asked his mother. It was the first word she had addressed to him. There was an eager interest in her speech.

" It's such a sap," he answered, carelessly. Then he smiled at her. His mouth was flexible, with sensitive lips, and though his smile was what an unprejudiced witness might call a grin, it answered her question, and satisfied her. He belittled the Harvey prize for English verse, but he meant trying for it, all the same. That was what his smile told her. And when had Sebastian tried for any scholastic prize that he had not achieved ? He had won a classical scholarship at Harrow before he was twelve, refused it, and been elected on the foundation at Eton the following year.

David Rendall had not allowed his son to become a colleger, so Vanessa had to forego the pleasure of seeing K.S. after his name, in the school list. But there were few school distinctions obtainable by an Oppidan that Sebastian had not acquired. He achieved everything at Eton, except skill in sport, and the popularity that goes with it. His mother urged him always on his course. She had a pathetic, overwhelming, misdirected pride in all his small triumphs. When he won the Brinkman Divinity Prize, she sent paragraphs about it to the Press ! She cherished his " sent up for good "

reports, as if they had been bank-notes; when he got into the house quartette, she imagined Mario looking to his laurels.

In some respects Vanessa Rendall had failed in attaining the full prime of womanhood. Her emotions were all young, and centred in unessentials. The Harvey prize for English verse at present filled her horizon; it seemed vital that Sebastian should win it. She was visiting Stella, but Stella only had the blurred background of her attention. She had been listening all the time for Sebastian's footsteps; she knew he would follow her here!

"Have you got a plan? Have you jotted down any of the lines?" she asked him, eagerly.

"Oh, don't bore Aunt Stella about the Harvey. I'll read the twaddle to you when we get home. They gave us the theme; '*Courage!*' Original, isn't it? Just like them, it's a regular cinch choosing a subject for the Harvey."

"What on earth is a cinch?" asked Stella. "Is that some new Eton slang?"

"Not it! Eton never invented anything so good; it is the American for a dead certainty. We have got a Yankee in our house this half. You should hear his opinion of our arrangements! He says his father's dogs are better lodged. I tell you what, Aunt Stella, of all the crackpot old institutions that ought to be shown up for mismanagement and muddlement, and general rottenness, it is Eton."

She handed him the jam roll.

"Never mind, old boy. I have no doubt you will put it right, and I should think, if you mentioned your views in the school magazine, you would achieve popularity with the authorities at a stroke. Now, tell me, where is Bice? What have you done with my Bice?"

He was very much in the way. She had a thousand things to discuss with his mother. Children

are always in the way with grown-up people, Stella thought. She kept her Bice in the schoolroom, in the background. But Vanessa was never happy without her lout about her! This was what Mrs. Ashton *thought*. What she did, always, was to make the boy welcome in her pretty drawing-room, to feed him with jam sandwiches, and interest in his pursuits. This was Stella's method, the secret of her charming personality. And Vanessa, although she occasionally suspected her sister of failing in complete sincerity, never doubted that her interest in Sebastian, and his career was real. It seemed impossible that it should be otherwise, seeing that his intellect was so overwhelming, his brilliancy so remarkable, his certainty of carrying on the Ventom tradition so complete.

They were Mrs. Ashton and Mrs. Rendall; but to Vanessa, at least, they remained, primarily, the daughters of John Hepplewight-Ventom, the remarkable father to whom her allegiance never faltered.

When Stella repeated her question about Bice for the third time, Sebastian thought the limit of his self-restraint was reached.

"I left her on the floor in the schoolroom, trying to kick down the door," he said, calmly.

"Oh, Sebastian! You have not been making my baby cry again? She was so looking forward to your leave. Why will you wretched children quarrel? Your mother and I never did."

"The mater has a perfect temper," he replied, quite unmoved. "I expect that is how it was. So have I, but Bice——" He took another large slice of cake; his manners were never quite on a level with his intelligence—"she is a holy terror." He drew a long breath over her.

Venassa never found fault with Sebastian; in simple truth, she never thought there was any fault

in him; she admired his sincerity when it was impossible to admire his suavity. But at this juncture she did venture to say:

"I suppose you beat her at ping-pong?"

"Yes, I admit that."

"It cannot be pleasant to be always beaten."

"Well, mater, you needn't hold a brief for Bice. I know more about her than any one else; she is all right in a way, but she has got no self-control, no self-control at all. She ought to go to boarding-school."

"And what am I to do without my baby?"

Stella hardly resented Sebastian's words. What she did resent was his presence there at all. She wanted to talk to his mother.

"Oh! you would be all right. You and the mater are quite content with each other. In the summer half you might come down to Windsor, and stop at the 'White Hart'; it is not at all a bad sort of pub."

"And you could dine with me there sometimes?"

He did not resent the gentle sarcasm.

"That is the ticket," he smiled.

Stella's gift of superficial sympathy had established her position with Sebastian. He, too, had complete faith in her interest in him, and in his importance to her, and to the family of Hepplewight-Ventom generally. She was only less to him than his own mother because he thought less of her abilities. He did not consider her clever. And he had no doubt that she had brought up her daughter disgracefully. He contrasted it with his own upbringing, and although he had to admit that his aunt had inferior material upon which to work, still he believed something could have been made of Bice, if she had been trained differently.

Stella Ashton was one of those women, irresponsible, humorous and delicate, who make instinctive appeal to everything masculine. She was small,

with exquisite hands and feet; her pale face was crowned with hair that waved naturally, brown in the shadows, and red in the lights. Sometimes the lids of the light blue eyes showed pinkish, and there were wrinkles in the corners. But always her lips were soft and inviting, and her smile charming, lacking only youth and happiness to make it irresistible. Although Stella ranked so close to his mother in Sebastian's calm affections, he never put this puzzling aunt of his on the same pinnacle of respect. It was an instinct with him, he did not reason about it, was scarcely conscious of a feeling to which he could put no name.

It was strange to think of Stella and Vanessa as twins. Stella was delicate, Vanessa had never known a day's illness. Vanessa's eyes were of a darker hue than her sister's, the thick lashes veiling them; there was not a ripple in the burnished ebon of her hair, but a patch of white over her left temple gave it distinction. She was half a head taller than her sister, and might have been ten years younger. There were no wrinkles round her eyes, no lines in her face. It was not as lovable as Stella's, it was the face of a clever girl to whom everything was fresh, interesting, but whose personal importance, aims, and interests, came before the world.

Sebastian urged his view about boarding school for Bice until Vanessa succeeded in changing the subject.

"Beatrice has had no one with whom to practise her ping-pong except her companion. By the way, Stella, Sebastian told me the new companion is a Miss Pleyden-Carr; not Ambrose Pleyden-Carr's daughter, surely?"

Stella would have answered, but Sebastian had a quick point to make.

"She has just as much practice as I have. They don't play ping-pong at Eton."

"Yes, it is Ambrose Pleyden-Carr's daughter.

I'll talk to you about that presently." Then she turned again to the boy:

"I am sure you were rude, or unkind, or something. Bice has been counting on your coming the whole week. Every evening when she kissed me good-night, she said, 'Sebastian is coming on Saturday, Mummie. Saturday and Sunday I shall have Sebastian.' And now you have been quarrelling with her!"

Aunt Stella was distressed, and therefore his mother looked vexed; so Sebastian, although he felt the injustice, and the absurdity of it, and jerked up his chin in contempt of women, and women's arguments, nevertheless answered:

"I suppose that means you want me to go down, and bring her round?"

"There's a dear," said Stella. "I am sure she is crying on the floor of the schoolroom, all by herself. Perhaps she has got a bad temper, but she adores you. I am sure I can't see why," she added, with a smile.

Sebastian smiled, too. In the vicinity of either, or both, of his parents, he knew himself to be enveloped in an atmosphere of admiring love.

"Have it your own way," said the boy, good-humouredly. "I will go down to her. It's an awful bore, but then, I suppose, one must always bore oneself in the holidays, and annoy oneself in school-time; that's what they call life!" And he sauntered out of the room.

"Isn't he good-natured?" said his mother, when the door closed behind him.

"A bit of a prig, don't you think?" answered his aunt, interrogatively. "But there, never mind. I see he is still perfect in your eyes; and, any way, thank heavens, he has gone downstairs, and we can talk. Did you see that Etruscan article in the *Quarterly?* I thought you would be full of nothing

else this afternoon. I suppose you have already written reams to the editor about his ignorance, and of how much better informed you are, and, incidentally, what father said, or wrote."

"No, I have not had time to think, much less read, or write. There are two crinoline pieces of Dresden in to-morrow's sale at Christie's, and they have been before me night and day. Nothing older, or younger, seems of importance. Just now Etruria has no hold on me, and the eighteenth is the only century that counts."

"What an extraordinary obsession that is of yours! I can buy all the vases I want for one-and-elevenpence-halfpenny at D. H. Evans, or Whiteley's, and I am sure my rooms always look as well as yours, although you are a millionaire, and I am a pauper."

"Millionaire! To hear David talk, sometimes, you would think *I* was the pauper. And, by the way, Stella, do you really think crinoline pieces of Dresden are vases?"

"Vases or figures, it is all the same. Your china mania is an absurdity! Why don't you breed dogs?"

"I don't like the smell of them, or their promiscuous habits. You think it extravagant when I buy china, but your bill at Jay's is twice as much as mine at Redfern's. And you must spend a fortune at the florist's," looking round at the roses and lilies, "I cannot think how you do it."

"Oh, don't worry. They come from Covent Garden, and cost nothing. I hate having my money affairs discussed. I know how to manage my income, that is all," said Stella, hastily.

She never liked to discuss her finances with Vanessa. Vanessa was such a clever woman, and so wonderfully dull, in some things!

The sisters were, financially, on a very different

footing, although their fortunes had been the same. Jack Ashton, when he left his wife in England, had left no provision for her but debts, and an exhausted credit. David Rendall, although he was a saint, and no husband for any woman, had inherited an old substantial business, and made a commensurate income. Yet there was no luxury that Vanessa had, and Stella lacked.

These two lived in a wonderful intimacy, and in a daily intercourse. But the gulf of silences created by their marriages had deepened, and broadened, day by day, and year by year. And of the gulf Vanessa knew nothing, deeming herself completely in her sister's confidences, delicately respecting some few scruples, retaining the same herself; thinking, quite rightly, that Stella understood, without speech, her life with David, taking for granted, quite wrongly, that she understood what Stella's had been with Jack, and what it was without him. Stella gazed sometimes across that gulf of silence, in whimsical amusement, at her more brilliant sister, who counted herself a woman of the world; who held a *salon*, and collected china, and wrote epigrammatic, futile novels, and cherished the family name; and was so blind, and innocent, and unworldly.

If neither of these two had realised happiness, Stella, at least, knew all that she had missed. Vanessa, with her ambitions for her son, her books, and circle of admirers, her china, and prints, never dreamed that her life was lacking.

Stella had no illusions left to her.

The sisters chatted that evening until it was time for dinner. Time for Vanessa Rendall to go home to her evening dress, and menservants, her well-conducted meal, with its elaborate setting, time for her to reluctantly leave Stella to what she supposed was solitude.

After dinner, in that luxurious, over-full, drawing-room in Harley Street, Sebastian lounged on the big, softly cushioned sofa, and read extracts to his mother from the poem with which he was endeavouring to win the Harvey prize for English verse. He asked her opinion of the lines, and of his treatment of the subject. He was very annoyed, although he fancied he concealed it completely, when she found anything he had done less than perfect. And he disputed, or brushed aside impatiently, any unfavourable comment. He queried her suggestions, and argued every point.

In the end, nevertheless, the poem was reshaped, not as it had been first projected in his young, inexperienced mind, but as, in her wider, and more mature intelligence, she made him see that it should develop. She was a writer by inheritance, as well as by inclination, and most dexterously used her small talent. She wrote novels, mordant and modern, and evanescent, and a gleam from her father's mantle of glory lit the critic's judgment of her work. She had success, and a special public, but guessed her limitations. Sebastian was a boy in whom she saw genius, the will-o'-the-wisp that had illumined her father's life, and evaded her own.

When the poem had been revised, and the words flowed easily from his pen on the lines she had indicated, her pride in him was quite uncritical. He declaimed it to her, when he had gone over it, correcting quantities with a scholarly air of absorption and importance. His voice was young, somewhat low, but it had a quality that held the ear, a note of music, although the music was in the minor key. She watched him as he recited the poem, and the words he had written, and the deep young voice, made her think of Keats, Shelley. It seemed to her that here, in this boy, hers, was all their fire, and immortal genius. And to her was entrusted

does do everything better than any one else. He is always right ! "

" The people who are always right, my Bice, fail a little in understanding their fellow mortals," Stella said, almost to herself. " Vanessa is always right, too."

" Doesn't Aunt Vanessa understand ? "

" Not quite—perhaps."

" Why don't you make her ? "

" Your Aunt Vanessa is very clever, and she thinks Sebastian is cleverer still, so it is no great wonder that he is impressed with himself, and his own importance. But I wish he would not make my baby unhappy," she went on, caressing her.

Dreamily the child answered, her head pressed against her mother's breast, her eyes half-closed.

" It wasn't Sebastian's fault. I expect I shall always be unhappy."

And then Stella grew chill, shivered, gathered the girl closer to her, had, perhaps, an unspoken prayer in that soft, ill-regulated heart of hers.

" Don't be so silly," was all she answered, however. " Are you not happy now ? "

" I like lying in your arms, I love you better than anything in the world, Mummie, you and Sebastian——"

" Well——"

Sebastian had said Beatrice had no self-control. Yet the child lay still when her mother's questioning voice reached her ears ; lay still for a long time. She would not say what was in her heart. It lay in her heart that she must always be unhappy, because she loved people more than they loved her. All she said, however, was :

" I am too sleepy to talk. Let me go to sleep here. Hannah can carry me up to bed asleep, like she used to when I was a little girl."

" You were always spoilt."

"That is what Sebastian says; but it's only because you never have any time to say 'No,' to me."

Stella laughed lightly. It was true. She rose late, and her early hours were languid, in the afternoon there were visitors, and various occupations. There was never time to contradict Bice, nor argue with her. It had always been so much easier to say "Yes" to anything she asked, and thus avoid all tears, and contention.

"So Sebastian thinks you are spoilt! I wonder what he thinks about himself? You really must get down now. You are getting too heavy for me, and I cannot ask Hannah to carry a grown-up young lady to bed, it is absurd."

Stella was really fragile. Even Bice's weight was too much for her. She put the girl off her lap, and entreated her to go to bed. There was much kissing, and many loving words; Stella's demonstrative affection to Bice was in reverse to Vanessa's apparent coolness with Sebastian.

She had got rid of the child by nine o'clock. Now the evening was her own, and that solitude, for which her sister pitied her, should have begun.

Perhaps she was to be pitied, although, before she had rested a little quarter of an hour, she heard the familiar sound of a brougham stopping at her door, the familiar knock, and voice on the stairs.

So weak, so solitary, so sweet a little woman, without a husband's countenance, or the protection of a chastened widowhood, had not been able to keep her defences intact. Here was the intruder, here too, was the mystery of Lord Saighton's life, his strange political lapses, his brilliant mistakes, uncertain ambitions, and unreliability. Here, in this secret orchard, lay the explanation of all of them. For the orchard had been planted in bog and swamp, and corruption lay in the tangled roots of its gnarled and distorted fruit trees.

CHAPTER III

SEBASTIAN did not obtain the recognition he anticipated for his ambitious poem.

The Harvey prize for English verse was awarded to Sparkes K.S. And this was the beginning of the end. Sparkes K.S., although he was only "a dirty little tug," was a personal acquaintance of Sebastian's, and, under very slight pressure, was persuaded to show his friend a copy of his prize poem.

It was shown to Vanessa too; for Vanessa went down to Eton to hear the result of the competition, and was lunching with her boy at Leyton's the very day it was announced.

It is hardly necessary to dilate upon the respective literary, or scholastic, merits of the poems. Naturally, considered as works of art, they were both rather futile. But there was no possible doubt as to which was the better of the two. Sebastian had had an idea, and had worked it out consistently. He had taken for his thesis the superiority of moral, over physical, courage, and told a story to exemplify it.

It was the time of the South African War, and the picture he had drawn was of the women, hardening their hearts, sending forth their husbands, lovers, brothers, sons; holding back their tears, whilst urging on the men; seeing all that made life sweet leave them, but being brave for their country, and for themselves; sitting at home,

afterwards, knitting socks, and working comforters, their withheld tears falling slowly, then, in silence, and in solitude. The poem was divided into two parts. In the first one heard the rustle, and clank, the movement of soldiers amid the shriek of the cannon, "the murderous music of Maxims," as the boy had phrased it; in the second, one saw the women, waiting, watching, praying, in their empty rooms, and desolate homes. The thing, although it was immature, was nevertheless alive; one felt the conviction in it, and it convinced.

Sparkes, K.S.'s poem was Newbolt and water. There was nothing in it to arrest the attention. It contained lines, not pictures, and those lines were ready-made ones, remembered, not invented. Putting the two poems side by side, and selecting the latter for recommendation, argued gross unfairness, or dense ignorance. It was not a case for anything between these two opinions.

Vanessa read the poems through very carefully, and very slowly, whilst the boy ate his roast fowl, drank his ginger beer, and watched her, without speaking. It must be borne in mind that Vanessa Rendall's was a name quite well known in the world of letters. Stella and Vanessa were the daughters of John Hepplewight-Ventom, whose "Epigrams of the Saints," "In Umbrian Hills and Valleys," and "Romances of the Sabine Hills," are amongst the most notable literary works of the nineteenth century. And in the second place, Vanessa had achieved her own distinction, by the delicate flavour, and cultured mannerisms of her half score of society novels. In appealing to her judgment, therefore, Sebastian was resting upon something tangible, and assured. Had there been a question between Vanessa Rendall, and the headmaster of Eton, on a subject of literary taste, or values,

the literary public would not have hesitated, at any moment, to have accepted the woman's dictum.

She read Sparkes's poem very carefully, she was anxious not to be biassed. But it was really not a position in which hesitation was possible. The King's scholar had succeeded in writing sixty lines of versification, without one original thought or phrase.

"Well, mater?" asked Sebastian, when he had commanded pine-apple and cream, and had informed the waiter that he should require an ice to follow. "Well, mater?" he said, "what do you think of Eton now?"

She pushed the papers aside; she was on her own subject, and spoke with authority:

"Not a doubt about it, not room for a shadow of doubt; yours is a poem—immature, of course, crude, but full of imagination, power, and intelligence. The other is a very bad schoolboy essay, without distinction, or individuality. The decision that gave its author the prize, and withheld it from you, is grossly unfair and indefensible. What do you want me to do?"

"I will talk to you about that presently. In the first place, I only wanted your opinion. You know I am not conceited, but I have read a good bit, and I believe I do know when a thing is absolutely worthless. They have cheated me out of this prize."

"Has Ferguson seen them both?"

Mr. Ferguson was Sebastian's tutor, and housemaster.

"Yes, he asked me to show him mine, and this morning I showed him Sparkes's."

"What did he say?"

"Practically the same as you do. Then he tried to gloze it over by talking a lot of twaddle about 'working for work's sake,' and not for the sake of reward."

"What he usually puts into your report?"

"The same sort of rubbish. 'Dignity and value of labour'—'desire for prizes somewhat vulgar.' He is an awful ass; conscientious, you know, and all that sort of thing, but he doesn't know the world. Never been outside of Eton, except to go to Oxford, nor outside Oxford, except to return to Eton. But, of course, I could see he knew my poem was miles ahead of the other."

"Do you think he influenced the placing of the prize? That he thought it good for your moral character not to win always?"

"No." Sebastian admitted it, although reluctantly. "I don't believe he actually influenced the result. But he has probably, at some time or another, told the Head of my vulgar liking to be recognised. You see, all the things I have got, are things neither of them could keep from me. The 'Trial' prizes, the 'Brinkman Divinity,' and the 'sent up for goods.' But they wouldn't give me the Harvey, and you will see they won't give me the Jelf. You want me to stay and have a shot for the Newcastle, but they wouldn't give me that either. You don't know the ropes here, mater. It suits them to give anything that is going, in that sort of way, to a Tug. There is a place in the boats for us, or in the eleven, or at football; we can compete in the racquet court. But the Oppidans have no right to try for scholastic success, it's considered bad form. The authorities really look upon me as an outsider, because of what I have done already. And so do the fellows. Of course, I ought to be in Pop, but I'm not, and never shall be. I am too good at school work, that's a fact, and they resent it all through the place. The thing is worked on a distinct plan, and to kick against it is just pawing the air."

"I do not think you are right about the New-

castle. Surely an Oppidan does sometimes get that?"

"Once, nineteen years ago; and his father was on the council!"

Vanessa paid for the lunch, and they sauntered down Brocas to the boat-house, still talking of the injustice that had been done to Sebastian. It is rare, astonishingly rare, to find a mother and son with the good understanding existing between these two, they seemed more like brother and sister. The time came when they lost that fine comprehension for a while, but to-day it was complete between them.

The silver-grey water was jotted with boats, outriggers, and skiffs. The eight shot past rafts, the sun shining on young arms pulling vigorously, shoulders thrown back, and faces set. The cox leaned forward, shouting continuously, and from the banks, one of the masters, on a bicycle, called out criticism and comment; many boys ran beside him.

Sebastian rowed his mother away from the crowd, into the haze of the June afternoon, into the silence of the Clewer backwater. She consoled his young pride, and cheered him by her complete comprehension of where, and how, it had been wounded. But still, she had not anticipated the conclusion at which he had arrived. She had mapped out Sebastian's life for him, in that calm moment, succeeding her night of agony, when the doctor's voice had penetrated her drugged brain, and she had heard him say:

"It's a fine boy; a Ventom heir; well, the world ought to hear of this little fellow."

From that hour to the present, her son had been to her materialised ambition. He had stood next to her work, before even Stella, she hardly yet knew how much he meant to her. She never contemplated anything for him but brilliant success,

and until now, indeed, his footsteps had not faltered in the path she had marked out.

"They cannot keep you out of the Newcastle," she reiterated, for about the fourth time.

But Sebastian, rowing on, giving her an occasional direction as to the steering, throwing out an occasional irrelevant observation, made no reply. Sebastian, in his grey trousers, flannel shirt, and grey felt hat, rowed leisurely. Under that shapeless hat one saw the sharply-cut young face, pale; the thin-lipped mouth was nervous, but the cleft chin was square and strong. No one could have called Sebastian Rendall a handsome boy, but his was a beautifully modelled head, wide in the brow, Grecian in its contour, and not only Vanessa saw the promise in it. She appreciated the strength, yet this afternoon she dreaded it. It seemed to her he had come to some resolution, that he had something to say to her of more importance than he had yet told her. And she felt, instinctively, that whatever his determination, she would do well not to cross it. She had said to herself a thousand times, noting other women with adolescent children, that if there came a moment when Sebastian and she thought differently on a given subject, she would treat him as an equal. She would not oppose her maternity to his intelligence. It was always Vanessa Rendall's way to make phrases of her feelings, or resolutions. At this period of her life she was primarily a novelist. Motherhood, sisterhood, womanhood itself, were shadows to the printed page's substance.

"Can we lie up by the lock, or are you in a hurry to get home?"

"I am not in the slightest hurry. I can catch the 7.32, if that suits you?"

He brought the boat deftly to the side of the weir, and shipped his sculls.

"Tie it up, and let us go for a walk," she suggested.

"No, I don't want to walk. She will ride all right here. Make room for me, I am coming to sit beside you, so that we can talk comfortably."

She made room for him; his young body, lax shoulders, undeveloped chest, the boyishness of him, she saw clearly. Nevertheless, it seemed to her that his mind was developed, reliable! She had a curious modesty, curious considering her position. She never doubted that the boy's brain was of better quality than her own. She was ready to listen to him, not with condescension, but with deference. They sat together comfortably for a few moments, in silent companionship, but his face was quite set and determined.

"You know, mater, after this, I can't stay."

She had the premonition of a shock, but nevertheless it fell heavily.

"The Newcastle?" she reminded him.

"I knew you would be disappointed. I have made up my mind to stay until after the Fourth, but I shan't go and say good-bye to the Head, and I shan't take my leaving book. I'll wash my hands of the beastly place without any ceremony."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, I knew you would feel pretty sick about it. But that is only because you take a narrow view. Come to think of it, what good am I doing here? Don't rot about it, just think it out. There is a very decent set of fellows at my tutor's, but you don't suppose they are any companions to me, do you? When a man wants to read, they bang at his door, or play a mouth-organ, or get up an amateur band." Sebastian's grin held the remembrance of many pranks. "Of course, it is all right, it has been very jolly sometimes, but somehow or other, I

have outgrown horse-play, I don't find any more fun in a mouth-organ, and I want to be free."

"I see your point of view. But not staying your time out, and resenting this Harvey matter, seems to me, nevertheless——" she hesitated a little for the word, she wanted it to move him, "a little undignified."

"Mater, that is all rot. Dignity and exhibitions are two words that can't be used in one sentence. I have hinted, what I'm going to say to you now half a dozen times, but you never took any notice of it. I have gone on in the path you laid out, just because you wanted it; not because I have had any illusions about it. You set your heart on my doing all the things that are no good to anybody when they are done. And as learning is easy enough to me I did them, just to please you. Prizes and scholarships have appealed to your vanity, not to mine; I soon learnt they didn't lead anywhere. Far from impressing the world I live in, they repel, and bore it. Here I am neither fish, fowl, nor good red-herring. At Hawtrey's, I worked for the Harrow Schol. when I might have got into the second eleven; at Eton I have flung away my chance for the eight, it was a very poor one, by the way, by getting a reputation for Latin verse. And, mind you, I am just as unpopular with the masters as I am with the boys. They are here to teach the Tugs, and watch the Oppidans. I have complicated their work. They suspect a fellow of all sorts of things if he doesn't play games, and he isn't a Tug. If you knew the beastly minds of these people whom you expect us to obey, and to whom we are supposed to look up, it would make you sick! An average of, at least, ten boys every half since I have been here, have been sacked, or superannuated, because the authorities have neither known how to guard, nor how to teach them. They have been

ruined for life, before they have learnt how to take care of themselves, or to avoid the pitfalls dug by the beaks. There is no justice in the place. I don't say it only because of my Harvey poem, although that may help you to believe it. Look at Tagg's house, for instance. It was broken up, and thirty fellows sent away, whilst every lower boy in the whole school knew they kept the two rotters who were responsible for all the trouble, because one was in the boat, and the other in the eleven. But I don't want to talk to you about that. One of these days there will be some plain speaking about it, and that will be the end of the famous public school system! The only thing we really are taught here thoroughly is to hold our tongues; and for very good reason too! You are so sensible, that I don't mind talking to you pretty straight; I take it for granted you know what I mean?"

She had not the slightest notion, but answered nothing.

"I've done my last stroke of work, school work. It's no good, and I'm simply sick of boys and masters. I suppose it is rather low down of me not to have spoken out about the injustice, or resented it until it touched me personally; but I believe I was coming to it. I've studied to oblige you, since I've been seven years old, and now I have finished with it. Do you think it matters whether they're Eton boys, or Oxford boys? Because it doesn't, not a bit! It is all run on the same lines. I've put in my last piece of school work, you can bet on that. There's no good arguing with me about it."

She was silent, and he too, for a minute.

"I suppose you think it's just because I have been disappointed in the Harvey?" he said tentatively.

"No."

"I've been sick of it for a long time. You talk of atmosphere; well, I'm in the wrong atmosphere. You see, I don't really like any of the things the fellows about here like, and I resent all the things they take for granted."

"Stalkey and Co.?"

"I made old Ferguson mad by quoting that at him."

"Is there any use arguing? Are you open to argument? Can I persuade you, do you think, not to throw away your school career abruptly, not to leave Eton, so to speak, under a cloud?"

"I'm not going on, if that's what you mean by 'am I open to argument.' I see I've given you the hump." For truly her face looked dull and disappointed, older, as if the light had gone out of it.

"Well," as one making a great sacrifice, "I'll stay the half out, if you want me to; and I'll get my leaving book, although I'd like to refuse it, and tell the Head what I think of the school, and the management generally; the antiquated laws, the beastly narrowness, and all the injustice —that's what I'd like to do. But I don't want to worry you, you're not a bad sort, as mothers go, so I'll leave in the odour of sanctity, just to please you, and I'll give a dinner party, if it will run to it."

"Oh, that is all right," she interpolated hastily.

"A really good bust, champagne, you know. That's the sort of thing they like, and I'll have an auction of my things, and make them a farewell speech in debate."

He went into details as to how he should celebrate his departure. And Vanessa sat beside him, silent. The blow, for of course it was a blow, hurt her beyond resentment. Sebastian had been brought up to expect justice, perhaps more than

justice. The platform, upon which his character was being moulded, fell to pieces when his work was unappreciated. She knew, immediately he had failed in obtaining the Harvey, that her only chance of re-establishing the school authority with him, lay in persuading him, or herself, here was another genius in the field, and that a better poem had been sent up. Had not young Sparkes, in the vanity of his heart, exhibited his prize poem, she might have carried her scheme through. But there was no argument for either of them in face of Sparkes's poem. The authority with which he was surrounded could not establish itself in the face of such a decision.

"I wish you wouldn't look so depressed. How would you like to be shut up in a backyard? That is the position I'm in," he said, breaking off from his description of the farewell supper he would give, to note her face. "It is all very well for you to talk, why, you were married at seventeen, and here am I, over that, and have never seen the world at all."

She did not see the humour of his plaint, her sense of humour, never her strongest point, was always in abeyance when she was following the convolutions of Sebastian's mind; she considered him too seriously, it was one of her many mistakes.

"But you are not prepared to face the world," she said, at length, hesitatingly.

"All rot, mater. Greek and Latin don't make you fit to face the world, nor three years in a university. We have too many of that sort here for me not to know."

"But you are not fit, you are not ready, you are not old enough, to do anything."

She could not yet begin to focus him differently. Before that shadowy university career was over, she would have arranged the next section of his

life; without that breathing time, she was nonplussed, all her images confused.

"You know jolly well, that doing nothing is not my line. I have never shirked work, nor idled, like the other fellows."

It was true, Sebastian was a born worker; she made a quick apology.

"Why, what I have hated most at Eton, after the injustice of the expulsions, has been the encouragement of the laziness;" he went on, "I have never seen why it should be considered good form to get filthy dirty on the footer field, and bad form to get a trial prize; good form to walk up and down the High, socking, and bad form to sit in the library. Half the beaks have no common sense, and the others have no power. The Head only cares about the boat. And besides, mater," he began to urge her along an easier path, "the place is fearfully unhealthy. I know I have never felt really well since I've been here. We have been swamped every winter, and the mud, well, you should just smell it!"

She was beyond sustained speech, dull with disappointment, with an overwhelming wish not to estrange him, not to show herself out of sympathy with his soreness, and irritation, and sense of having been badly treated. To whom should he come for comfort and comprehension, if not to his mother? Again she thought of Shelley and his parents. David Rendall was not like that narrow squire, Shelley's father, not in the least like him. But Vanessa wanted Sebastian to look to her, and to her alone, for sympathy. Perhaps that was why she asked:

"What do you think your father will say?"

Sebastian knew and trusted David better than Vanessa ever had. That good, unusual father, of whom he so seldom spoke, had touched some

deeper spring in the boy's fine nature than Vanessa had yet reached, notwithstanding her intellectuality, and literary fame.

"Oh, he will be quite satisfied. But, mater, that reminds me, there is something I have often been going to ask you, you don't mind——" there was a certain hesitation. What he had to ask seemed impertinent, inquisitive. Sebastian was a little shy about it, and so surprised her.

"Ask? Of course you can ask me anything; why not? I have no secrets from you. What is it? Go on!"

"About the business, about the pater's income? Tell me, I don't ask out of curiosity, but before I make my plans I want to know. Are we really so well off as we seem? Is the governor rich? He hints sometimes—but there, of course, just tell me what you like. What have I got to rely upon?"

"You have always had everything you want?" she said quickly.

"Oh, that is because you are both such bricks to me. I know how differently I am treated to other fellows, but still . . . I want to know how soon I ought to be earning money; or if it will ever be necessary."

She did not reply at once. Her thoughts required readjusting, she had had a shock, and her strength, that strength upon which she prided herself, was reeling a little. Of course, she had always known that Sebastian had been a little outside, a little separate from his surroundings at Eton. She had been satisfied, perhaps even proud, that he had not assimilated the tone, that he had not become the mere devotee of the school, a mere upholder of its conventions, like other boys.

John Hepplewight-Ventom had been a Borrow of the towns, a wanderer, an intellectual gipsy.

The Ventoms, a long line of them, had been articulate with pen, or with brush, one of them even with the violin bow. But no Ventom had ever been articulate in praise of conservative rule. Reverence for tradition, and authority, was not Sebastian's birthright, not from her side, that is to say, and she wished to think, had taught herself to think, that Sebastian was entirely a Ventom; that David Rendall's name was all that he bore of Rendall. It was one of her dreams that he should discard even that.

"I think your father is a rich man; money has never interested me very much. I suppose he does not work all these hours for nothing. I have an income of my own, your aunt and I have each five hundred a year, mine will go to you when I die. Stella seems to do much more with her money than I can, but then Stella, for all her seeming frivolity, is wonderfully practical and clever. But why are you asking? Will you not let me see into your plans? What have you in your mind?"

"Do you make a lot of money by your books, mater? Of course I should be able to write, any fellow can earn money that way, I suppose?"

She smiled at that.

"No! I do not think I make what you would call a great deal of money."

"A good income?" he persisted.

"I do not know what I make, I never go into it. When my publisher sends me a cheque, I generally buy something unnecessary, china, prints, or ivories; I suppose it comes to a good deal, one way or another. I used to offer the cheques to your father; he never wished them to be applied to household purposes. But why this sudden interest in so strange a subject?"

"Well, it is difficult to form my plans without knowing if I am justified in leading a comparatively selfish life for a few years."

At some length Sebastian then proceeded to tell his mother all over again why he had decided to leave Eton, and why he refused to consider the idea of going on to the 'Varsity. He dwelt again on the barren years he had wasted in trying for valueless scholastic prizes, letting the intellect, on which he prided himself, lie fallow, whilst he associated with schoolboys and schoolmasters, all of whom he found narrow, self-absorbed, and unresponsive. He must gain experience. He admitted, he rather more than admitted, he laboured the point, that he *had* an idea in his head, but he did not wish to mention it as yet. She longed for his complete confidence, but would not press him for it. Listening to him, it became more and more definite to her that his school-days were inevitably over. Young as he was in his expressions, in his undeveloped reasoning power, yet he was no longer malleable. Nor could she conscientiously press him to remain in subservience to an authority which he no longer respected.

Sebastian's school-days were over. They had been one long series of triumphs, one great gift to her.

They were not a caressing mother and son, but she put her hand on his arm.

"I won't balk you, Sebastian, I won't stand between you and your needs. If you want to leave, you must leave, but——" her eyes softened, "but don't let it alter things between us two. You will not be a schoolboy any more, but you will want me just the same, won't you? We shall be in sympathy just the same?"

He was embarrassed by her half caress, by the hand on his arm, the intimacy between them had been reached without demonstration.

"That's all right, I knew I should be able to make you listen to reason. I have not got the

whole thing cut and dried yet, but I must have six months in Paris to start with, and I should like at least as long in Germany, Spain and Italy. It is absurd to know only one language, one hates to feel at a disadvantage with anybody, but of course, it won't take me long to pick them up; that sort of thing comes easy to me."

"Then your Latin and Greek has not been wasted. They will help you there?" She was pathetically eager to justify the education she had thrust upon him.

"Oh yes, I daresay. But don't run away with the notion that I'm going to spend the next few years only in learning languages; they are simply an incident. I don't want to tell you what I've got in my mind just yet, nor the way I intend to get there."

A colour had come into his face, patchy, uneven; his words were a little hurried, as if his breath came too quickly. Whatever ambition he envisaged, whatever goal he dimly saw, had obviously the power to move him, and it moved her to a sympathetic thrill and silence. His way must be left clear for him.

In the train, on the way home, she thought over all that had occurred. Her belief in the boy was absolute, and what he desired must be granted him, of that there could be no doubt. She must break the news to the boy's father, she must go through the farce of consulting David. The end of the week would see her husband back in Harley Street, and she would tell him that she had decided to let Sebastian go abroad for a year or two before he went to Oxford. That was the euphemism with which she intended to cloak the affair. But she hoped, she still hoped, that after these wandering years, Sebastian might take up the thread of those studies he now despised.

It vexed her to think, to remember, that she must consult her husband. David Rendall had a thousand virtues, but few of them appealed to her. He had, however, half a score of habits that were as blisters to her social nerves. She was only free from irritation when she was not in his company. She had never had a day's illness, and her constitution was practically perfect, yet a neuralgia of the conscience, physical in its effect, was what her husband stood for in the limited range of her emotions. She had resented the marriage state from the moment she had realised it, it was only her innate conscientiousness, and honesty, that had compelled her to preserve its semblance.

But never, not until the very end, did she see, or understand, David Rendall's tender, comprehending, daily, and hourly effort that the chain should chafe only, and not gall. Those awkward hands of his were for ever tremulous in the effort to lift the fetters from eating into her flesh.

CHAPTER IV

It was not strange that these daughters of the great stylist had mismanaged their marriages.

John Hepplewight-Ventom had kept his twin girls on the Continent during all their childhood. Their mother had died in giving them birth, and with her, too, died all that was young, and human, and natural, in John Ventom. The children seemed no part of her, or of him; a cruel accident, a burden, where had been a blessing. But he was always an honourable man, and he accepted his responsibilities. Relations in England approached him with kindness, with offers of adoption, but he kept the little ones by him. They were to be found, now in convent schools near Paris, now with governesses and tutors in Rome, Vienna, Brussels, or Florence, wherever his humour took him. He grew, with their growth, into a vague, superficial intimacy with them, and whenever no new work absorbed him, he found pleasure in their society, in their intelligence and grace. He had been occasionally interested in their likeness, and unlikeness, to him and to each other, in the philology of them, as it were.

But of the world, and its ways, of men and women, he taught them nothing, and they had learnt nothing, when at seventeen, they came to England for the first time.

The Honourable John Ashton was their great misfortune. He met them in Venice, and achieved an introduction. Their homeward journey was

very dilatory and circuitous. The dissolute young attaché had ample opportunity for his wooing. Hepplewight-Ventom had just begun to realise that Vanessa was intellectually nearer akin to him than her sister. With the selfishness of genius in pursuit of an idea, he absorbed whatever he found of value. His then idea, and his whole mental horizon was bounded by it, was a monograph on early Italian missal paper. Vanessa's sympathetic intelligence, young eyes, and enthusiasm, were in constant request for the consideration and differentiation of specimens. Stella was admittedly bored with such things. Vanessa was then, and remained always, unobservant of what held the attention of other girls or women. She lived ever most vividly and intensely in her imagination; the monograph on fifteenth-century paper possessed her entirely for the moment, she was inordinately proud that her distinguished father should take her into his literary confidence.

Stella had definitely engaged herself to Jack Ashton before father or sister realised that they had been living in an atmosphere of impetuous young love-making. And then it was too late to interfere. But it was unlikely the young couple would have had serious opposition to encounter. John Hepplewight-Ventom believed in the liberty of the individual, and he knew nothing, for or against, Jack Ashton. The engagement was of little importance in comparison with the monograph.

Before Vanessa had time to grow jealous of Jack's monopoly of Stella's time, or interrogative of his desire, or capacity, to make Stella's happiness, they were in London, and David Rendall, of Messrs. P. and A. Rendall and Co., owner of the Rendall Paper Mills, appeared on the scene.

John Hepplewight-Ventom made David's life a burden to him, whilst he was endeavouring to

reproduce fifteenth-century Italian paper. Vanessa and her father spent days at the mills, and David discussed material, for hours, with them in London. Experiments were made with every description of recognised pulp, English, Irish, and Continental. There were old blue linen rags from France, wood pulp from Norway, curious reeds from China, Esparto from South America, and pampas grass from Canada. The wire frame, specially made with the Ventom hieroglyphic, was dipped into every imaginable mixture before the great faddist was satisfied.

Poor David fell humbly in love with the bright-eyed, graceful girl who was as keen as her father on texture, colour, and printing possibilities.

Everybody knows what happened. The monograph for which the experiments were being made was never completed, the "limited edition" went no further than the prospectus stage. The years in Italy had left the idealist in no condition to brave an English spring; he caught a cold and disregarded it, the cold became a fever and was still ignored. Before the gravity of the case was diagnosed, the danger signal of that first hæmorrhage had been hoisted. And it was never again lowered. John Hepplewight-Ventom passed from one rarefied atmosphere to another, one may hope more rarefied.

There was no member of his family now ready to offer a home to his suddenly orphaned girls; they were practically without kin, and their trustees indifferent. Jack Ashton pressed for an immediate marriage. In a strange interview with Vanessa, immediately after the funeral, a so-called business interview, about the now useless sheets, David Rendall, moved by unmeasurable pity, an almost insane desire to be of use, in an agony of modesty and apprehension, put forth a timid suit. Stella,

coming in inopportunely, strengthened him to urge it.

What would Stella do without Vanessa? Vanessa had talked wildly of returning to Italy, of taking up her father's work; she was bewildered, weakened, by the suddenness of her bereavement. Stella begged her not to go away, not to leave her alone, she knew no husband could replace her sister; perhaps, already, she doubted the wisdom of her choice. It was what they had always planned; to marry on the same day, to live in England, as near as possible to each other. There was no other way to fill the blank caused by their father's death.

There was argument, and misgiving, but Stella's affectionate pleading prevailed, and on the same day that Stella culminated her love affair with Jack Ashton, Vanessa married David Rendall, to their mutual bewilderment and misfortune.

He knew, from the very beginning, that he had married above him. Socially, intellectually, physically, he saw, with painful accuracy of vision, the superiority of his young wife. What he had expected when he secured the treasure it is difficult to realise; what he received was easy to see. His genuine humility of spirit, his complete unselfishness, his overwhelming desire for her happiness, were all obscured in her eyes in the early days, by his obnoxious claim upon her. Had not Ventom's death made Vanessa homeless, and threatened Stella with loneliness, the marriage could never have taken place. It was only Vanessa's unbalanced grief for her father, her almost equally unbalanced love for Stella, that blinded her, for a desperate hour, to David's and her own incongruity. To her he was ever the typical tradesman, awkward in a drawing-room, a trifle servile, of no importance.

Because Stella, at seventeen, had fallen in love with Jack Ashton, Vanessa had taken this husband

whose entire outlook upon the world was as a blank wall to her.

Vanessa was unconscious, and in her youthful hardness, incapable, of realising how greatly her incongruous husband loved and admired her. She resented marriage intemperately, it had no meaning for her; between herself and David Rendall the word held no holiness of meaning. It was the man who recognised it, and early made his renunciation, as an offering at the shrine of his love.

The first year had been difficult, but for the advent of Sebastian it might have proved impossible. But David Rendall was extraordinarily moved by his new dignity of fatherhood, accepting it in the lowliest of spirit, striving for worthiness of his responsibility, becoming, if possible, more utterly selfless. Soon after the birth of her son, Vanessa discovered that literature was her *métier;* she wrote her first novel, and made a small sensation with it, a sensation, and a success, that both of them over-estimated. But it proved the end of any possibility of her acceptance of ordinary domestic life.

In the very earliest days of his marriage, David had stood aside so that the sisters should not think of him as of a barrier between them. He stood aside later, that his wife should feel him to be no interruption to her literary life. It was impressed upon him presently, that his son was the grandson of John Hepplewight-Ventom, and he let his own slighted paternity remain in the background.

He grew to understand his young wife so well, and to love her so greatly, notwithstanding, or perhaps through, his complete comprehension, that he could never forgive himself for having married her, nor palliate his offence. His love and loyalty were never shaken by her attitude toward him. But his self-esteem was bruised and wounded; under her

critical young eyes he grew yearly more awkward, incongruous, less possibly her husband.

He arrived in Harley Street a few days after Sebastian had given in his ultimatum about Eton, after a week of thought and toil, of the busy booking, and rapid execution of orders, of telegrams to and from his firm, calculations of freights and prices, of all the minutiæ that spell successful business. He returned home to an empty house, to a chill unwelcome, and the dreariness of its disregard. But he resented nothing. He made no claim for appreciation, consideration, or comprehension. It was only as a firm that David Rendall still asked for recognition. As an entity he had a complete humility of spirit. But he was "our Mr. David," he was David Rendall of Messrs. P. and A. Rendall and Co., the firm that had been established over one hundred years in the City of London, and never had a question raised as to its credit. He was proud of that, pathetically proud, it stood to him for patriotism and religion, in place of home and happiness, he clung to it as mystics to their symbols.

His pride in the business that his grandfather had created was utterly beyond the sympathy, or comprehension, of the daughter of John Hepplewight-Ventom. It was a small business, a limited business; there was no possibility of millions in it, not even of hundreds of thousands, it was, at the best, a five or six thousand a year affair, steady and unexciting. David Rendall knew that his wife had a vague additional contempt for him, because he was proud of that small solid business. Vanessa was naturally frank, and David instinctively reticent. She tried to conceal her feelings, she never wished to hurt him; that she did so constantly, continuously, even fatally, was the secret he guarded from her always.

He came home this Saturday and mounted the

three flights of stairs that led to his bedroom. He sat down to recover himself, for his breath came quickly; somehow or other, although he was but a little past fifty, he felt like an old man. He had gained weight rapidly lately, and the stairs tried him. He had to remove his travel stains, unpack, transcribe his notes, put his papers in order, but first he rested. He did not disguise from himself that each time he came home from these business journeys, which he took regularly four times a year, he returned more weary, more consciously fatigued. Although he was only fifty-one, he felt to-day that he was almost worked out. And a pain, at the back of his mind, that added bitterness to his over-fatigue, was belief that he ought to let his partners know he was no longer able to do them, nor the affairs of the firm, full justice. He dreaded to tell them, he had had the fatigue and doubt before, but he had put off telling them, for he could not contemplate life without P. and A. Rendall. He had always travelled for the firm, both in town, and in the provinces, and if he were not fit to travel. . . .

To-day the stairs had tried him more than ever before, his breathing was more difficult, he had pins and needles round his heart when he reached his room. A "little inconvenience" he called it to himself, but nevertheless it terrified him. It terrified him because, once or twice before, the pricking sensation, the pins and needles, had, as it were, gathered themselves together, in a sort of cramp. He bore pain well, but this pain was almost unbearable; it made him helpless, and, not for his own sake, he feared helplessness.

Vanessa, with her fine health, and strong brain, and clear, sane outlook, shrank from weakness and helplessness; she felt them as a degradation, something of which to be ashamed. He knew that, for Vanessa was very open about her likes and

dislikes, there was no subtlety, nor disguise, about her. It was only Stella to whom she accorded her suffrages in illness. Stella's unmistakable delicacy hurt Vanessa, got beneath the surface of her hardness, and made her uncomfortable. She met her trouble by denying its existence, for that was her way.

David concealed his illness, whenever possible; for he knew how it was with her. He was sorry, for her sake, that he felt out of health and feeble. He looked round his room now that he had managed to get up there. It was bare, and chill, and sparsely furnished. Vanessa liked colour and drapery and ornamentation; her own rooms were luxurious. He thought how she would hate to climb up here, and sit with him if he were to have another illness. She *would* do it, she ever strove to fulfil her duties toward him, he saw and appreciated her struggle. She would come up here, and help to nurse him, but she would do it with a sense of impatience, luminous to him behind the cloak of her kind words and service. She would never suspect that David saw the impatience behind the words. Because David said so little, she always thought David saw little. But, as a matter of fact, he saw everything, like God may see our human struggle, with infinite pity and forgiveness.

David had never been a strong man since he had had typhoid, he knew exactly what Vanessa would do if he became ill. She would get in nurses, and superintend them, and twice, or even three times, a day she would come into his room, and enquire how he felt. She would sit with him when the nurses were at their meals, trying to find subjects of conversation. She would read to him. But even there their tastes were diametrically opposed. Outside P. and A. Rendall, and the paper trade, it was only science that interested David. Vanessa's

mind was essentially unscientific, yet she read Huxley or Tyndal to him, conscientiously.

She would question him as to his symptoms, insisting always that he was getting better. He would answer her gratefully, reassuringly. After her task was over she would go away trying not to resent that he made this dumb claim upon her.

In the years Sebastian spent at school, Vanessa's moral growth had stopped. She had become, always more definitely, an imaginative phrase-maker. She felt that her life lay in her library, bending over her desk, pen in hand, outside affairs. She created epigrammatists, the real men and women she met, were too coarsely human; they had not sufficient ideality for her. When she was not writing, she found toys to play with; anything was better than crude humanity. Her toys were needlework pictures, she copied them exquisitely, prints and china, ivories, and jade. She preferred them to everything save Stella and Sebastian. She ought never to have married. David heard her say this often, and she never noticed that he winced whenever she said it.

Alone in that big, bare room, this afternoon, with the pricking sensation round his heart, and some little foresight of what it meant, David could feel, through his fear and pain, a little hopeful, for Vanessa, that some day she would be free from this burden of matrimony. He found no fault with her, with her view of life and its responsibilities. He had taken advantage of her youth, ignorance of the world, of her sudden orphanhood, to force his suit upon her. She was never like other girls. No man had come into her life to make him jealous, all she knew of love was her feeling for Stella. It was her ambition, only, that the boy materialised, Sebastian had not required tenderness from her; although his days had not lacked

tenderness. As yet, it seemed, he was his mother's son, neither of them quite ripe in the sun.

David, finishing his notes slowly, his dressing yet more slowly, avoiding, however, that climax of pain that he dreaded, thought, as ever, very lovingly, of Vanessa's peculiarities. She was straightforward and honest, this one partner of his who did not value him, she was beautiful, brilliant, famous. How should she feel interest in a middle-aged business man, tired, awkward, dull!

The drawing-room, where he waited for her later on, was an environment in which David never felt himself at home. He had a knack, or habit, of stumbling over anything that was in his way, and in Vanessa's drawing-room everything was in his way; lac screens, footstools, and Chinese seats, Japanese dwarf trees in blue and white dishes, small tables overladen with jade, with *famille verte* vases, and *famille rose* plates. All these things David Rendall dreaded; more than once he had done irreparable injury to irreplaceable treasure. He was out of place in his wife's drawing-room, he always felt it; the very fact that he felt it so acutely, accentuated it.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Vanessa came home.

"Oh, you are there," she said, opening the drawing-room door, hurriedly. "I am sorry I am so late. I have been at a *matinée*, and afterwards to tea with the Robinsons, practically a suffrage meeting, with many dissentients. I will be ready in ten minutes. Are you all right?"

She was too anxious about the dinner hour to wait for an answer. It was not a figure of speech; the regret that she was late on the evening of David's return to London was quite genuine.

She hurried over her dressing, hurried down to dinner, determining to compensate him in some way

for her tardiness, to make the evening pleasant, to talk to him.

But it was always an effort to Vanessa to know what to say to David, and this occasion proved no different from any other. He knew that so well, he would have helped her, had he been able. But subjects between them were limited, mutual interests they had but one.

Over the soup she asked him,

"Did you have a good journey?"

"Fairly well, as things go. There's nothing much doing just now, the paper trade is dull."

"What a pity! But anyway, it is a change for you, getting away from London, interviewing a different set of people."

"Oh, yes, there's something in that: and tell me, how have you been getting on? What is the news here?"

"Nothing very new, I have been working all the week, and Stella has absorbed most of my afternoons. There were three first nights, but no good play."

"That must have been very disappointing."

They relapsed into silence until the next course appeared.

"And what is the matter with Stella?" David asked then. "I am sorry to hear she has been ill again."

"Dr. Gifford calls it influenza. I have been there a good deal; in fact, I think if you do not mind I will go to her this evening. Do you mind?"

"Oh, of course not, if she is not well, you must not leave her alone."

For what did the prospect of a solitary evening matter to him, whose life was solitary?

Glancing at him across the flower-laden dinner table, the thought of his loneliness may have struck

her, for she said, as if to find occupation for that dull evening of his.

"You have not read the paper, yet."

"Yes, I did, in the train, coming up. But it doesn't matter, don't mind me; I am not feeling up to much this evening, I shall probably go to bed early."

The dinner dragged on.

"Sebastian wants to leave Eton," she announced, abruptly, when the servants had withdrawn.

"Yes, I know. He wrote to me to Manchester."

"Why did he write to you? What did he say?" she asked, quickly.

"I have got the letter somewhere."

It was a way he had, to forget where he put things, one of his many ways that irritated her. He felt in all his pockets now, wondered whether he had dropped it anywhere, was flustered at her obvious impatience, yet sympathised with it.

"No, I believe, after all, I must have left it upstairs."

"You might have known I should want to see it," she exclaimed, impatiently.

"But you saw him recently; you spent a whole day with him!"

"That doesn't make any difference, I like to see what he writes to you."

"He was quite well, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course he was well, quite well, he always is, he inherits my constitution. But what was in the letter? What made him write to you at all?"

He got up:

"I will go and fetch it."

She could not but note the slowness of his movement, the almost unwillingness.

"Let John fetch it," she said, much more gently. It was not that she was deficient in heart, it was only that David had ever abstained from making

appeal to it, and that it was not yet full grown, a little atrophied for want of use.

"Oh, no, he would not be able to find it, I don't quite know what I did with it."

"You never do know what you do with anything," she murmured. She had not meant him to hear, but he heard.

He looked grey when he came down with the letter, his lips colourless.

"Dear Pupsie," the boy had written, in his irregular schoolboy's hand, "I am seeing the mater on Wednesday, so she will be able to tell you all my news when you come back; this is only just to cheer you on your beastly business journey. I'm sorry things are not as brisk as you would like them to be. I knew you had the hump at half-term. I hope you've sold stacks, and got cheery since then. You must come down for the Fourth, there are lots of things I want to talk to you about. I am going to leave, for one thing ! ! ! !

"Sparkes got the Harvey. Poor beggar! I don't grudge it him, his people think he's a genius, and they may as well remain of that opinion whilst he's here. Can I have a couple of change suits and a proper shooting-coat? It will save a lot of time if I get my things at Brown's. I want a new dress-suit, too. I hope you don't think I'm very extravagant. By the way, I used a lot of paper over my Harvey poem, so I suppose we got something out of it after all. I was sick about it at first, but I don't care much now, it was rather footle any way, though the mater thought a lot of it. Buck up,

"So long,

"Always loving son, S. R."

Vanessa had no pleasure out of the letter. Nobody else would have called it a sentimental letter, but to Vanessa it read in this way.

"It is such a pity you allow yourself to be

depressed when you are with Sebastian, it is very bad for him. He asked me if we could afford to let him go abroad for a year or two! I don't think you ought to let him know when business is bad. I suppose all businesses are bad, at times. Stella tells me her dressmaker was complaining just in the same way. I should not be surprised if it were not that talk of yours about bad times that has induced Sebastian to give up trying for the Newcastle, insist on leaving Eton, and not going up to Oxford."

"What's that?" said David, surprised for once out of silence.

"Sebastian does not want to go on to Oxford." Her heart sank as she said it; it seemed the end of all things.

There was a pale dawn of hope, of relief, in David's dull eyes; as if of light on a dark horizon.

"He is seventeen. I was in the office when I was fifteen."

"*You!*" she said, quickly, and then checked herself. She must not tell her husband that he could not compare himself with Sebastian. "Sebastian has such exceptional gifts," she added, almost apologetically.

David admitted there was little analogy. Sebastian's scholastic capacities were out of the common, and his had been but ordinary. But Sebastian had other qualities, qualities of which David knew more than Vanessa.

"What does he want to do?"

"He wants to go abroad for a year or two, to study modern languages. I don't quite know his plans."

She was already sorry she had been impatient over the letter, that David should have had to mount to the top of the house for it.

"That is why I was so anxious to see his letter.

I thought he might have given you some hint, some clue."

He solaced her pride.

"It is not likely he would have told me anything he had kept from you."

"No," she answered. "No, of course not. But I am very anxious."

She tried to talk to him about Sebastian, but David was unfortunate in saying he was not sure that Eton had ever been Sebastian's proper environment. Vanessa could not bear criticism from David, and it was she who had selected Sebastian's school. She tried not to show her irritation, but it was a complete failure. David saw her effort, and the difficulty she had, after that, in making conversation.

The constraint between them was always growing; Vanessa could not be natural, or at ease, with her husband; she had allowed herself first to despise, then to ignore, finally, to be sorry for him, and this was the worst stage. Her conscience was never clear as to her conduct toward him, yet all the efforts to alter it resulted in failure. She could not but realise his qualities. But her eyes were critical of his contours, and her ears were impatient of his cough. It was absurd that he should deem himself qualified to judge of what was best for Sebastian.

Presently he suggested that if she were going to Weymouth Street it was time to start. He offered to walk round with her, but she preferred to drive. She hesitated about leaving him alone, but he reassured her, he said he was tired from the journey, he would soon be going to bed.

And, indeed, when she had been persuaded that he really did not desire her to stay at home with him, she felt glad.

David, when he was alone again, dozed over his cigar, for half an hour, in the easy chair. When

the servants woke him, coming in to clear the dinner things away, he roused himself sufficiently to go, very slowly, up to bed.

But he felt happier this evening than he had for some time. Sebastian was leaving Eton; it had never been the right place for him. David's compunction for having made Vanessa his wife prevented him opposing her wishes. But he knew his own weakness, and his conscience, even more sensitive than Vanessa's, sometimes tortured him with the fear lest he sacrifice Sebastian to it.

CHAPTER V

WHEN Sebastian came home at the end of the summer half, with his leaving book, a presentation volume from his tutor, an autographed, slender, folio of indifferent poems from one of the masters, and the usual quantum of prizes, he had only a few days at home before him, for he had accepted an invitation to Scotland for the 12th, from a school friend.

That first night at dinner he talked, not of his school triumphs, for to them he had always been indifferent, but with boyish swagger, about grouse. He aired some newly acquired information, and was voluble on the subject of a Harris tweed shooting-coat, with leather on the shoulders, and a particular make of pocket.

His mother had promised him a gun, and this gun, for which he had already been carefully measured, filled the foreground of his talk. He told his father, incidentally, that he should want a "pot of money" for travelling and tips, as he must "do the thing well."

David smiled his assent.

"You can have what you want, of course," he said.

But before the evening was over, somehow or other, Sebastian's spirits had sunk, and his loquacity faltered.

David announced himself as "rather tired," about ten o'clock, and went off to bed.

"Doesn't the pater look seedy, or is it my idea?" he asked his mother, when they were alone.

"Seedy? does he? I had not noticed," Vanessa answered, indifferently.

And then she began to question the boy on his future plans, to probe quietly for his confidence. She could not pretend to undue interest in David's health, with Sebastian to hold her. She was glad David's short cough was no longer in the room. It checked conversation, punctuating it in the wrong places, it was supremely irritating.

The next day was Friday. The office in Queen Victoria Street was closed until after the Bank Holiday. David said it was a treat to be at home, to have nothing to do. He walked about the house, restlessly. Yet he had no place there, no hobby, no occupation! The boy sympathised with him.

"It must be a fag, going every day to the same place, at the same time, doing the same thing."

David told him there was never monotony in business, there was endless variety. He grew quite animated talking of the shifting kaleidoscope of commerce, of detail and organisation.

"He likes talking about Queen Victoria Street," Sebastian said, almost reproachfully, to Vanessa. "Why did you interrupt him? It is very interesting, I like hearing about it, too."

"I thought you were being bored; it bores me unutterably, to hear what Hopkins ordered, or Hayling sent back."

"It is his whole life."

Before the end of that three days Sebastian found himself, involuntarily, watching his father, jumping up when he came into the drawing-room, insisting on his resting on easy chair, or sofa. With some gentle sort of roughness he began ordering his father about, and "bullying him" as he put it.

"What have you been rushing for, pater?"

he would ask, when the quick breathing made him think that David had been hurrying. "You have got lots of time; you have got all the time that is! What is the good of sprinting, and playing you are a two-year-old. Take it easy, it's weight for age, you know."

"I'm all right, don't mind me." That was David's response, it had become a mechanical one with him.

But, nevertheless, he was glad of the young arm; proud, and moved, by the slangy, indefinite sympathy.

If that Saturday to Monday was not a gay time for Sebastian, David at least had some happy moments. He would obey the boy, lie down on sofa or easy chair, and watch him whilst he talked, or read, or lounged.

Vanessa was little at home. Stella was in the throes of her quarterly attack of influenza. She considered herself neglected if Vanessa spent less than half the day with her. Vanessa felt herself justified in leaving David, even if he were "rather run down," since she was leaving the boy with him. It was comparatively a free time with her. "*Persimmon and the Fig Tree*" had been published just after Easter. A new idea was germinating, but she had got little further than a title. She could lend herself to her ties. It was fortunate that Stella needed her now.

Whilst Vanessa was occupied with Stella's varying symptoms, her husband and son were together for many hours. Sebastian became more uncomfortable, less certain about his immediate future; he grew deeper into his father's confidence. Not that David told him things, but the boy really had remarkable perception, and he began dimly to see the things that David left untold. It struck him, that his mother had stood between him, and

at what he ought to look. And the thing at which he had to look, although he saw it dimly, being very young, and very self-absorbed, was that his father was not in good health, and felt the strain of business, of earning the income upon which he and his mother lived luxuriously.

He had expected to enjoy these holidays, but the beginning of them, at least, proved anything but enjoyable. His father was only fifty-one, other fellows' fathers, older than his, still played cricket, and golf, laughed heartily, were full of their own pleasures, lived selfishly. His father had no pleasure but in him; he was always tired, and his cough seemed to shake him. He said he was all right, that there was nothing the matter with him; that Sebastian must go away, and enjoy himself. But Sebastian was never quite like other boys. The cough that only vexed Vanessa, stirred something in him that made him doubt, and question, and feel depressed.

At the end of the three days of holiday David went back to business, and Sebastian took advantage of the occasion to visit the Gun Club, and try his new acquisition.

Dining together that evening, at first, the little party of three was unusually animated. Sebastian was full of his exploits, his parents of appreciation. They had even exchanged sympathetic looks. One of the instructors had told the boy he had "all the makings of a fine shot," and he said he had made up his mind that he would show the Aspreys something, when he got among the grouse. He made reckless plans for the disposal of his bags of game. His spirits had risen again suddenly, for no apparent reason, and he kept up a continual flow of conversation.

Neither he, nor Vanessa, noticed that David, since the soup, had eaten nothing, that the colour

in his face was rather deeper than usual, and his lips bluish. The flow of Sebastian's conversation, for once, seemed endless to his father, the dinner interminable. If he were only alone, he could bear what was coming. He wanted to ask Sebastian to help him to his room, or to go out of this, and leave him to himself, but no words came.

The throes of a physical terror were fastening upon David. The pricking sensation that he knew so well began its ominous warning. He filled his wine-glass with trembling hand, some of the spirit was spilled on the table-cloth ; Vanessa looked up, and he felt she was criticising his awkwardness. He could not even apologise, he was absorbed in trying to avert the impending attack, the brandy seemed to help a little, and he reached out for more.

"What are you doing ? " asked Vanessa. " Isn't that your third glass ? "

There had been times lately when a faint suspicion had dawned in Vanessa's mind ; David was so curiously unsteady, and now he kept a bottle of brandy in his room ! His hand stopped mechanically in the act of filling his glass, his eyes were dim and strained.

" Are you not accustoming yourself to stimulants ? " she said gently, uneasily.

He could not answer, the pain was deepening its hold, he feared, he feared horribly what was coming.

" Hullo ! taken to drink ? " Sebastian turned to him, smiling, but what he saw made him call out quickly :

" What's the matter ? " His young shrill voice was full of fear ; he ran to his father, and put thin arms about him. " What is it ? Lean on me. Ring the bell, mater, quickly, he's ill, he's awfully ill. . . . Oh, Pupsy ! "

The boy's strength was not equal to the man's

weight. David slid through his arms to the floor; the pain went beyond disguise, presently beyond consciousness.

The sudden change in Sebastian's tone brought Vanessa to them.

"You stay where you are," she said, hurriedly, her own heart suddenly palpitating. "Lower him gently." Her hand was on the bell. "Go at once for the doctor," she told the man.

"Oh! can't you do something for him? Can't you do anything, mater?" The anguish in the boy's voice distressed her. She tried to get a teaspoon of brandy through the closed lips. She felt wretchedly, that she was only resenting this call on her, she tried to overcome her repugnance, to be of use. Sebastian could do nothing but try and hold his father in his arms, fling himself beside him on the floor, and hold to him, as if he could hold the pain away. David was not so far gone, but that he could feel the thin arms. Before the paroxysm of agony had passed, he even tried to smile reassuringly.

"Oh, don't!"

Sebastian burst into tears; for he saw the effort his father was making, and he held him closer.

"Oh, pater, pater!" Feebly through the dimness of his subsiding anguish, David murmured:

"I'm all right,"—breathlessly he got out: "don't cry, I'm . . . getting better . . ."

"He is swallowing the brandy, his colour is coming back. Try what you can do, he will take it from you." But Sebastian's left hand was shaky, and his right arm was round his father's neck.

"You go on, mater," he said, in his broken voice. Vanessa held the glass to her husband's lips, wishing she could feel anything but repulsion, feel differently. He smiled at her, and tried to thank her, he could hear the vibration of the boy's sobs.

"I'm sorry . . . to be . . . so troublesome."

And after another pause, when a little more strength returned;

"Don't stay with me, I'm all right. Sebastian, . . . your mother, she can't bear this, send her away."

All the time it was of them, not of himself, he was thinking. It was the worst attack he had had, the agony had been unbearable. But he kept murmuring that it had passed, that he was better now, they were not to mind . . . His exhaustion did not make him, for a moment, oblivious of Sebastian's grief, hardly of his wife's pallor.

Dr. Gifford's arrival was like air and sunshine in the room; the awful shadow they had seen on David's face seemed no longer there.

"Ah, he has had one of his attacks of indigestion?" the doctor said, coolly, rapidly taking in the state of affairs. He knelt down beside the patient, displacing Vanessa, putting Sebastian too, gently aside. He had his hand on David's pulse.

"You've given him brandy, quite right. Lie still, dear fellow, you'll be all right in a few minutes, now. Here, Sebastian, just you put your hand in my pocket, and give me a case you'll find there. That's it, now open it."

The doctor broke a little glass ball; there was a curious, pungent smell in the room. Almost before they had got used to it, David's breathing was easier, and his face had grown flushed. Dr. Gifford unfastened his waistcoat, then his collar. "Open the window, give me that cushion, here, put it just under his head, gently now," for Sebastian, in his anxiety to be of use, lost something of his deftness. "He will do all right now, don't you move, don't you dare to move;" David was trying to get up. "No, no; I know all about it; you want to apologise for being such a trouble to us all. Well,

it is an unconscionable hour to call me out ; and just when I had sat down to dinner, too ! But your wife is going to order me up something to eat. And you will lie where you are, and entertain me, whilst I sample a glass of your best champagne."

Dr. Gifford's tact was not cultivated, it was the efflorescence of a large heart, kept constantly informed by a clear brain. He knew the danger of David Rendall's condition, and what it indicated ; but nothing was to be gained by alarming the invalid or those who would have to minister to him.

Therefore he sat until he thought it was safe for his patient to be taken upstairs, making a pretence of dining ; talking of himself, and his day's engagements, his hurried breakfast and missed lunch, interrupted dinner, and the inroads he was making into his capacity for supper. He brought into the excited atmosphere that sense of security that comes from commonplace things. The figure on the floor was no longer tragic, when Dr. Gifford, with a mouthful of chicken, was telling an anecdote of two sisters who had come to his consulting room that morning to induce him to take their cases at reduced fee, because they would both require his services at about the same time, and ' there was always a reduction for quantity.' He made it seem quite absurd and amusing. Although Vanessa considered it rather a coarse story, and was sorry Sebastian should hear it, she recovered her wonted serenity under it, and, after all, that had been the result at which the narrator aimed.

" You will have to give up rushing through your meals," he told David, who was lying on the floor, getting flushed, and easier, under the rug that had been flung over him. " Indigestion plays the very deuce with a man of your age. The food presses on the thorax ; before you know where you are, an irritation is set up ; pain comes on, and a

man thinks he has heart disease, when it is only a rump steak in the wrong place."

It was very reassuring to the two listeners, who knew nothing of medicine, and had unbounded confidence in their doctor. Almost before David had been got upstairs, with the help of a carrying chair, borrowed from a neighbouring doctor, Vanessa was thinking of the dramatic value of the scene, and Sebastian had remembered to be ashamed of his tears.

"I will give him a few of those glass things to carry about with him," Dr. Gifford said, on the steps, to Sebastian, as he bade him good-night. "And never hesitate about the brandy if he gets an attack whilst you are with him; carry a flask about with you."

"Is he, is he very ill?" Sebastian had not quite recovered his self-possession. "Is it really only indigestion?"

Dr. Gifford threw a kindly arm across the boy's shoulder.

"He wants all we can do for him, poor fellow. But he is all right for to-night, I think. Come round and see me in the morning, and we will have a chat about him."

* * * * *

"I think, after all, it will be a bit slow in Scotland," Sebastian said to his mother at breakfast the next day. "The journey is an awful fag. I am really getting great fun at the Gun club. In fact, I've made up my mind not to go, anyhow for another week or two."

"I am glad to have you here," was all she said, and even that was a little perfunctory. For she had just found a wonderful title, and was longing to get at her first chapter. It was a pity she had so many ties. She had satisfied herself already that David was all right, climbing up the stairs,

even before breakfast, to dutifully inquire. He told her he had had a good night, and he felt quite himself, and there was nothing in an attack of indigestion to keep him at home. He quoted Dr. Gifford. She strongly advised him to remain in bed. But he wanted to go out, he was overburdened with a sense of hurry, so many things required putting in order.

"Don't you mind about me, there's a good dear," he said. And again it was the phrase, and not David, she found arresting. She wanted to edit it. Anyway he said he was well again, and she accepted his statement.

After breakfast it was necessary she should go round to Stella. Heaven only knew when she could get a couple of uninterrupted hours in her study. But she had found her title. "*Between the Nisi and the Absolute*," a strange time of waiting, emotion in suspense, a wonderful subject.

Every morning, during all his adult life, punctually at a quarter to nine, David had gone to the mills, or to Queen Victoria Street. "Don't try and make me change now," he urged, and she acquiesced. He did his best, too, to reassure Sebastian, who breakfasted with him, and scolded him for getting up, and for contemplating going out. But David gained his point.

"Do you think the pater is really right in going out to-day?" the boy asked Vanessa. He had put on his hat, and was walking round with her to Weymouth Street. "He seems to me to look jolly seedy. I think you ought to make him chuck the office for a bit; stay at home, and take care of himself, he has a beast of a cough, and he gets those pains now and then, you know."

"Oh, don't worry about your father, dear," she answered, "he is always the same, he always has been the same; illness is merely a habit he has

contracted, a hobby with him. It stands him in place of golf, or stamp collecting. He says he is always quite well in the City. You heard Dr. Gifford tell us the attack we saw was nothing but indigestion. And he worries unnecessarily about business. There seem to be good and bad seasons in the paper trade; that, and not taking any exercise, is what has upset him. I hope, by the way," she turned to him, abruptly, "it is not through any idea about your father that you have given up your visit to Scotland?"

"Oh, no, of course not," he answered, quickly. The boyish shyness at the thought that any sentimentality should be attributed to him, naturally taking alarm. "It is such a rotten journey."

"Yes, it is long. Of course I am glad to have you with me a few days more. I am only sorry I cannot be with you all the time, but Aunt Stella's condition worries me. This is the third attack of influenza she has had this year; she has a bad throat, and she eats nothing, and altogether I am not satisfied about her. I think I shall have another doctor for her this afternoon."

He walked by her side, rather silently, through the wide gloom of Harley Street, to the narrow quiet of Weymouth Street. Just before they came to Stella's door he said:

"I am not so abso-bally-lutely certain about going abroad, mater."

She stopped suddenly at that, and eagerly.

"You are going to work at home. You are going to have a coach, you are going up to Oxford, after all. Oh, Sebastian, you do not know what it means to me."

"You think I should get a scholarship?" he said, vaguely.

"Not a scintilla, not a shadow of doubt of it, there is nothing you could not do. Well, we will

talk about it at tea-time. Father won't be in by then, so we shall be quite undisturbed." Her face was bright, her interest eager, and somehow that hurt him.

"She is jolly anxious about Aunt Stella, who has the flue, a common thing that every one gets; she doesn't seem to think about the governor," the boy commented, as he followed her into his aunt's house. But all he answered was:

"As I am here, I may as well come in, and see what Bice is doing to-day."

"We shall be quite undisturbed at tea-time, we can talk things over," Vanessa said again, from the door. "Your father won't be in by then."

The boy thought that it was a long day's work for a man, for any man. He counted it up; nine to seven, ten full hours! And his father's face, on which he had never seen anger, nor reproach, nor anything but affection, would persistently intrude. It was a plain face, lined, and tired, and old, but it rose before him, and there was something in it that made a lump in his throat.

Was his mother blind, or was he fussing about nothing? Damn it! it was hard on a fellow when his father looked like that.

He did not care to be alone, thinking over these things.

In the last few days he had almost forgotten Miss Pleyden-Carr, but now he went to seek her, and Bice in the schoolroom. Because he was restless and unhappy himself, he teased Bice, until she rushed from the room in tears.

"Now we can talk comfortably," he said, flinging himself on the sofa. He wanted something to distract his mind.

"I don't know that I ought to let you stay," Miss Pleyden-Carr replied, hesitatingly.

Bice's companion-governess, Ambrose Pleyden-

Carr's daughter, was *blonde cendré*, almost an albino. Masses of pale hair surmounted a childish face, with blue ingenuous eyes, her nose and mouth were too small, and all her features insignificant. But nine people out of ten would have called her a very pretty girl, delicately and exceptionally pretty. She prided herself on an eighteen-inch waist that needed no compression, and a straight back. Her toilette occupied many hours, her looking-glass had absorbed her vitality. She was about twenty years of age, and without an interest in the world beyond her own feeble personality.

"I don't think you ought to stay, since Bice has rushed away. I think I ought to go after her——"

"Oh! Come now, there's no harm in our being together." He was very flattered at the suggestion that it was not safe for him to be alone with her. "We don't get much talk together, that little vixen is always in the way. Tell me, now, if I stayed in London, would a fellow have a chance with you? I suppose it isn't true that you are engaged? Bice tried to get a rise out of me by saying you were."

There was a beastly time in front of him, everything was beastly, he might as well get any compensation that was possible.

"Are you going to stay in London?"

"Well, what inducement will you give me?"

"What inducement could *I* give you?"

"You might say you wanted me, that you liked being with me, for instance."

"Bice doesn't care for you to pay me much attention."

"But what is your view? that is the question; not what Bice thinks. You get a day out now and then, don't you; we might do a Greenwich dinner, or Richmond, together?"

He was cutting rather a dash here after all; his mercurial spirits began to rise.

"Ought I to?" she answered, with encouraging hesitation.

There was really much of the child in Pleasey, notwithstanding her position. She had a child's greed, although not for childish things. Her life was dull, work of any sort was uncongenial to her, and she was vaguely bored with Bice's activities.

"I don't think I ought to promise to go out with you. Bice would not like it if she knew."

"She won't know, nobody will know. That is where the fun will come in. You leave it up to me. We'll have a ripping time."

"But I heard you were going abroad."

"Never you mind what you heard. I might be going abroad, if you were going with me."

He felt himself a very Lothario when he had said that, and the colour flushed into his cheek. He came over to where she was sitting, and stood beside her chair. Further than that he would scarcely have ventured without more encouragement. But his heart was beating rather fast, and in his brain thronged a hundred romantic incidents. "After all, a fellow must have some fun," summarising them.

"You know you are awfully good-looking," he went on.

"I wish you wouldn't say such things."

"And what a ripping lot of hair you have got. I'd like to see it down."

"I don't like my hair, I wanted it to be dark and curly, like Bice's."

"Bice? She's a perfect little gipsy!"

"She is very fond of you."

"I wish you were."

"Do you?"

"Do you think you *could* get fond of a fellow?"

"I know how clever you are."

"Oh! bar rot now."

He came quite close to her, not quite sure what was stirring in him.

She was demure, but not discouraging.

"I say——"

He wanted to kiss her, and she knew he did. It was a pretty game, and Pleasey had played it often. This time she had to be the teacher, and the lesson led but a little way. But even that little way took the boy, momentarily, out of that shadow-land of fear and misgiving in which he had been moving the last few days. He thrilled with some unrecognised emotion, the sap rising in his veins brought the promise of manhood to him. In long, dim, distance he had been gazing fearfully, ignorantly, at death. Now, not less ignorantly, but without fear, he gazed at life.

"How good you are to me," he said to her. "I've been jolly miserable lately." For in the end, after much fencing and demureness, she had let him kiss her, one shy boy's kiss, on her pale cheeks, and then she played at being ashamed, and lit his chivalry.

"Let me come and talk to you sometimes; you are so different from everybody else. I am awfully in love with you."

"You must not be that."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I know you must not. Bice——"

"Never mind about Bice; she is only a kid. I say, you know, I feel different about you to what I have ever felt before. You won't throw me over, or say I'm too young, or anything like that. Let me call you Pleasey when we are alone."

Sebastian was a little bewildered by his new emotions, and a little proud of them. Of course

he had fallen in love; he always knew it would happen to him one day, but it had come so quickly. His self-possession left him, the rush of words in which to tell her how wonderful she was, became congested in his throat.

Perhaps he was glad that Bice came back at this juncture. His love was, as yet, too slender and frail a structure to bear further experience. Bice looked at the two, suspiciously.

"Oh! you are still here! I was not sure. Aunt Vanessa wants you to go round to Dr. Gifford's; she thinks nurse has made a mistake over his directions. I am to go with you to explain."

Bice brought back into the room its familiar atmosphere. He swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew he must chaff Bice before she began on him.

"I have got to be seen out with you—have I? That's rather rough on a fellow, isn't it?"

"Oh! don't be unkind to poor Bice," exclaimed the gentle Pleasey.

"I don't want you to interfere between me and Sebastian," was Bice's rude retort.

"I was only rotting her," Sebastian explained.

After all, why tease Bice? She was awfully fond of him, people had a way of getting fond of him. "Come along then, is that mane of yours going to stick out like that all your life?"

Bice's hair was very curly and unruly, but she gave him the retort discourteous that he expected, and they went out together fairly peacefully.

The cousins were not as unsympathetic as their dialogue suggests. They had many pursuits and memories in common, the intimacies of childhood, hereditary predispositions.

Dr. Gifford saw them immediately, and reassured Bice as to her mother. He confirmed the nurse's report on the directions he had given her. And

then he detained Sebastian, with a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"You wait ten minutes for your cousin, will you?" he said to the girl. "You will find plenty to amuse you in the dining-room, illustrated papers, and some picture books." He, too, teased her a little, kindly; Bice resented her size, and the implication that it kept her still a child, but no one could resent Dr. Gifford.

The Sebastian Rendall who emerged from the doctor's sanctum a quarter of an hour later was not the same lad who had entered it. The colour had gone out of his cheeks, and something like fear was in his eyes. Lightly as he had let him down, Dr. Gifford had told him that which made the incident in the Weymouth Street schoolroom dwindle into unimportance. He walked quite silently by Bice's side, trying to regain his courage. It was she who broke the silence.

"I heard Aunt Vanessa tell mother you had changed your mind about going abroad," she began.

"Well, I wish she wouldn't mag about my affairs; that is the worst of you women, you can't keep your mouths shut."

"It would have been splendid though, travelling about. I wish I were going. I wouldn't have given it up for anything. But I suppose you want to show the Eton people you can get a Balliol Scholarship without them."

"Don't be such a fool. I wouldn't have it if they offered it to me."

"Then what are you going to do?"

He must have a confidant. He turned to her, suddenly.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Oh! Sebastian!" He knew she could, he had tried her more than once.

"Well, then, I have made up my mind to go into business—to join the pater."

"Oh! Sebastian!" The tears in her eyes, the dismay in her voice, soothed him.

"Pretty shocked, aren't you?"

"How will aunt bear it? Oh! Sebastian, how can you?"

"You don't suppose I *like* it, do you?" he answered, gloomily.

"Then why——"

"Why? Why? Because I am not so blind as some people, that's all!"

"I don't understand. Sebastian, don't be so—so unkind, tell me, explain. You can't do it, you, that were going to be everything, that we all thought— Oh! Sebastian!"

"Leave off yelling out 'Oh! Sebastian,' half across the street. Good heavens! you are not going to begin to cry?"

But she was, she had begun already. Sebastian was her hero, for him she dreamed her dreams, the world grew dark when the glowing figure sank; Sebastian in business, Sebastian buying and selling!

"I am not crying: I've got a cold," she sniffed.

It was something to have Bice on whom to work off his feelings. After all Dr. Gifford had only told him what he had already guessed. And as for his decision, had he not been making it all these long three days?

"You can't howl all the way home, we had better turn into the Park. If you are so jolly dense you can't see I have no choice, I'll show it you."

They were silent until they were in the comparative quiet of Regent's Park. Beatrice accomplished a certain amount of self-control, and Sebastian began to talk again, as soon as the green was about them.

"The governor is ill; the mater doesn't see it.

She must not be made anxious, she has a new book simmering. He is working eight hours a day, so that I can have all I want, and she can have her china, and prints, and things. I can't go on watching him struggle out at nine o'clock in the morning, come home, dead beat, at seven, with both hands in his pockets, ready to give us all he has made. I can't stand by, and see that going on, and then go off, shooting grouse, and enjoying myself—letting him grind on. It takes the guts out of everything. I feel like a beast every time I look at him. Why should a man of fifty work for a man of eighteen?"

"But you can work later, you can make money, writing, or at the bar, you can get scholarships, you can coach—and you're only seventeen. You are the only grandson of Hepplewight-Ventom, Sebastian! you *can't* just buy and sell, you can't be a shopkeeper, like Uncle David!" The child's grief and rage could not be suppressed.

"I can't be a cur," he kicked the gravel up with his feet, dug vicious holes in it with his gold-headed cane. "*She* can't see it. He can't even stand the stairs—he is not fit to go out and about by himself. He has always been a brick to me—the mater is a wonder, of course, but some one has to take care of the pater."

She got closer to him, he liked the instinctive sympathy, and for once did not repel her.

"I meant to go abroad, to study philology, the origin of language, to make a name, but there is no use going into that now. I have got to give it up, to give up everything but sticking to the Governor. Whatever he does in the City I must learn, and I must do it instead of him. After all, I suppose it would be something if I grew like him."

"Like Uncle David!" There was only one translation of her exclamation, and he turned on her, almost savagely.

"There you go, just like the rest, half blind. Can't you see what kind of man the Governor is? He doesn't swagger about, or amuse himself, but did you ever hear of his doing a selfish thing, or a mean one? Did you ever hear him talking about his feelings, or his individuality; do you think he hasn't got any? I tell you he is the best man in the world and—I believe he is—Oh! damn it."

Sebastian had turned his head away from his cousin, and she could not see his eyes, but his voice startled her!

"I believe he is going to die."

That hard young Sebastian who Vanessa thought she knew so well, got out the words with quivering lips. Bice had never seen Sebastian cry. She was tingling all over, hot and ashamed, and sat by his side in silence. He brushed away his tears in a minute, they were painful ones.

"Isn't it ghastly? The mater doesn't know anything."

"Did Dr. Gifford tell you?"

"I have been miserable about him all the time. Just now, when you'd gone out of the room, I said: "The pater looks queer, doctor, can't you buck him up?" He said: "Not for long, I'm afraid, dear boy."

Bice remembered, now, that Sebastian had left the house quickly, she had to run to catch him up. Dr. Gifford was the family doctor, the friend of all of them. If he had not spared Sebastian, it was because he knew the boy had strength, and could bear his burdens.

"Has any one told Aunt Vanessa?" Bice asked, presently, when she had had time to grow quiet, and dared to speak to him.

"No, and don't you open your mouth until I give you leave. I'm going down this afternoon to

see Uncle Will; the Governor said he would not be at the office, he is at the mills to-day. When I have arranged with the uncles, and told the pater what I'm going to do, I'll let her know. She will be glad I am going to stay at home, and that will make things easier."

Very few words had passed between the boy and the doctor. He had known his father was ill, from the beginning of the vacation. He could see, anybody could see, that his daily work was trying him beyond his strength. David told the boy he had obligations to the firm, that what he did in the City could be done by neither of his brothers. What could a fellow do? Sebastian had it borne in upon him gradually in these few days, and now he felt, convincingly, overwhelmingly, that it was he who must meet his father's obligations.

The truth about his health he nevertheless tried to put away from him.

"Would it do him good to rest?" he had asked Dr. Gifford.

"All the good in the world. But there is little chance of such a thing, under present circumstances. I cannot even get him to take a week's holiday."

"If some one else could do his work——"

"Ah! if anybody could!"

Dr. Gifford knew what he was about. Sebastian had been growing too selfish, too self-absorbed, his mother had nearly succeeded in making a prig of him. But there was good stuff in the lad; there could not fail to be with such parents. They had perhaps brought him up too luxuriously, made him too much the centre of his little world. But the doctor had great hopes of him, and was doing his share towards his fulfilment of them.

CHAPTER VI

THAT very afternoon, to the surprise of Messrs. P. A. Rendall and Co., and for the edification of the whole establishment, Mr. Sebastian Rendall called at No. 1130 Queen Victoria Street. He was resplendent in a well-brushed top hat, the black coat that made his slenderness so apparent, grey striped trousers turned up over his patent leather boots, tan waistcoat, and grey suede gloves. He was known to the clerks, who resented rather than admired him ; it was almost with difficulty he found one willing to inform Mr. William Rendall that he wished for an interview.

The warehouse looked very dull and dreary to the boy on this August day, half empty, save for a few stacks of sample papers on the dusty shelves. There was no bustle, or movement, the clerks and warehousemen looked only half alive, the gloom was complete. He knew he would have to learn all about paper, but what was on the shelves seemed very grey, and ugly, and untempting.

" Well, young Admirable Crichton, and what can I do for you ? " was his uncle's greeting.

Mr. William Rendall had a red beard and wore glasses. He was the head of the firm, a man about sixty-five. The other partner, John, was also carroty, but in an inferior, pink-eyed way. Both of them eyed Sebastian critically, not unkindly, although they always had disapproved, in their

bachelor superiority, of his education, and upbringing, and literary mother.

He greeted them with an easy nod; he liked them both; they were associated in his mind with "tips," and handsome birthday presents. He thought they were rum old buffers, and not equal to his father. It was difficult to begin what he had to say to them.

"How do, Uncle Will. How do, Uncle John."

He subsided into a chair, talked about the weather, commented on the state of the streets.

"How's business?" he asked presently. The question irritated them both. As a matter of fact, it was pretty slack, and it seemed an impertinence that he should enquire.

"Is that what you came into the City for?" John asked, in a way that was intended to be satirical, "to enquire how we were doing? Because I should think you might have waited until the evening, when your father came home, and asked him."

"Very smart," answered Sebastian. "You have guessed it in once. If that is what I had come for, I'd have stopped at home. Where did you get that tie, Uncle Jack?"

John instinctively put up his hand and straightened out the bow. He was more dressy than either of his brothers, younger looking, too, for all his sixty years. Although he disapproved, on principle, of Sebastian, he had some secret family pride in him. So indeed had William, although they never admitted it to each other. John was rather pleased his dandy nephew admired his tie, for of course he took the enquiry to mean admiration.

"At Hope's, do you like it?"

"M'yes, it's all right. Pretty stuffy here, isn't it?"

The windows were closed, the outlook of the

partners' office was on to a similar block of buildings, high enough to obscure the light, a reflector arrangement only succeeded in obstructing air; the electric lamps had to be kept burning all day.

"We have not been spoilt in a palatial establishment at Eton," said William. "It is good enough for us, and good enough for your father."

Sebastian grinned at the remembrance of his "palatial room" at Eton, eight feet by ten, with iron bars to the windows, a door that would not shut, and walls that sloped to the ceiling. Both Uncle Will and Uncle John had been to tea with him there on successive fourths of June, and both of them had thought, as business men, that David was getting bad value for his £300 a year.

The conversation kept at the same level for a few moments. As a matter of fact, the boy was embarrassed, found it difficult to say what he had come for, and covered his difficulty with flippancy, until he succeeded in thoroughly irritating the two, whose suffrages he was seeking.

"Well, young sir, I can't waste any more of the busiest time in the day," said William, at length. "I quite appreciate your condescension in looking us up, but I've got work to do."

He took up a pile of letters, waiting for signature in a basket on the table, and the hint was followed by John, whose own desk, on the other side of the room, was distinguished by sheets of writing, checked in red ink, rather more interesting, Sebastian thought. He knew they meant him to go, but he sat on, watching one uncle rapidly scanning the post, adding his neat signature; watching the other, referring to his ledger, comparing his sheets.

"I say, couldn't the clerks do that work?" he asked John, presently.

"No, they couldn't," he answered sharply.

Why did not the boy go, what on earth was he lingering there for, what did he want?

"Couldn't I?"

"*You?*"

John paused in handling his ledger. William looked up from his correspondence.

"*You?*" said John again, and William listened.

"Yes, I; why not? I'm not exactly a fool. I learn things pretty easily."

The brothers' eyes met.

"Sebastian, my boy, what did you come down here for to-day? Did anybody send you? Had you any object in coming?" William's voice was encouraging. Sebastian flushed a little, but took the plunge.

"Would I be any good, do you think? Could you use me? Uncle Will, Uncle John; I'm a Rendall, too. The firm has been here nearly one hundred years, the pater tells me."

He was shy, and his usual glibness failed a little.

"One hundred and eighteen, we celebrated our centenary the year your father married. We were one of the first firms of paper merchants in London. The Rendall Mills were——"

"I know; I know all about the firm. Well, is there room for me?"

It was not what he had meant to say, it was not the way he intended to put it.

"Did your father tell you to come to us?"

They were more than pleased. It had been a grievance, it had been their only grievance against David, that he had brought up his son to consider himself too good for the old business; the business made by three generations of Rendalls.

"No, it's my own idea; I thought if I could settle it up with you, I would announce it at home afterwards. I want to come down of a day with the pater. I might begin by going about with

him, if you didn't mind. I suppose there is some one goes round with him. Carries the samples, or whatever it is. I don't care what I start upon."

The brothers smiled at Sebastian's idea of his father's work, travelling about, accompanied by some one with samples, like a pedlar with his pack. But he had come to them in the right spirit.

"We will talk about your work later on, we must have a chat together, and with your father. It is enough for us to say now, at once—I think I may speak for you, John, as well as for myself—you are very heartily welcome, we shall be glad to have you with us."

He added some trite phrases about work, and responsibility, but they did not efface the effect of his welcome. The welcome touched Sebastian; he was quick to take in what the business meant to them, and that they were glad he would be a part of it. He said the right thing, that he would be proud of it, too; and then was half ashamed, for, after all, it was only business.

But William got up and solemnly shook hands with him, and John followed suit. They were, perhaps, old-fashioned people; but the little ceremoniousness of it pleased the boy's taste, and he talked with them afterwards more easily. Their point of view was quite clear to him, a great pride in their good name in the City, and established credit. They talked of David, too, in a way that he thought would make Bice "sit up." To them, David was the pivot of the business, he had ever been the brain of the firm. He it was who interviewed the clients, and practically ran the mills. Hand-made paper was their speciality, the Mildenhall Press used none but Rendall paper; every famous copy of the limited editions of the Ewelme Press bore the imprint of the firm. They were in touch with the

first publishing houses in London. All this, and more, Sebastian heard.

William and John superintended the office, and the detail of distribution, but it was David who brought in the business. He was rather venturesome in their eyes, almost too go-ahead, but he had proved himself right again and again, and they had reaped the profit of his greater foresight, keener vision. Hitherto Sebastian had not thought of his father as a clever, or particularly able man, only as a good one. He began to realise that the John Hepplewight-Ventom traditions of art and of scholarship, his mother's clique of literary and newspaper people, left outside their consideration, any appreciation of a talent for generalship in business. If Uncle Will was the nominal, his father, it appeared, was the actual, head of the firm. And it was obvious, too, that his father had been right in thinking himself indispensable, in finding it impossible to abandon his responsibilities.

It did not seem so certain now that he could do his father's work for him. He would have to learn his way first, and that might prove a slower affair than he had contemplated. Work, however, appealed to Sebastian; he liked it, a rare quality in the very young. But then Sebastian was rare, it was only a pity that he knew it so well. He was greatly upheld at the moment by the thought of the career that he was sacrificing. It was impossible to do otherwise, after what he had learnt from Dr. Gifford, but there was no doubt he was rather a fine fellow. Languages were his forte, and philology—but there was no use thinking of that now.

He took a hansom from the City; work was in his scheme of life, but economy held no place in it. Rather, as the hansom took him further from the crowded, sordid City, nearer the restful, luxurious

West End, did he begin to think, as Sebastian always thought, of the rewards of labour.

Of course, if he went into business he would make money, a fortune; his greater brain must conduce to a greater success than Uncles John or William, even than his father, could accomplish. He would run a motor; from Holborn to Oxford Circus he was weighing the merits of various cars. Then he would reorganise the office, brighten it up a bit, sack the old clerks, get young fellows about him, brisk things up. By the time he had reached Harley Street, he had the finest premises in the City, plate glass and mahogany, commissionaires in uniform, everything, and more, that he had seen at the private bank when he had cashed cheques. He had inherited the novelist's imagination, a dangerous gift for the business man into which he saw himself develop.

He had not said a word to his uncles about his father's health. He could not bring the words to his lips. Then, too, ever since he had made his decision, hope, those high fallacious hopes integral to his youth, grew strong, that when he was with his father, looking after him, sharing his work, David would improve in health, grow happier, healthier. It was difficult to say when or how Sebastian had first realised that his father was not a happy man, but certainly the knowledge was there.

CHAPTER VII

SEBASTIAN had to break the news of his decision to his parents. He planned to do it at dinner, he even arranged a little scene. He would announce it carelessly, he mentally rehearsed the exact shade of carelessness, he looked forward to his mother's dismay, and how he would meet it, to his father's surprise. David must never know the true reason; it was then he felt a throb of heroism again, and a sickening reaction of anxiety.

But his schemes fell through.

Stella had announced herself convalescent, and had released Vanessa from the attendance that she saw was irksome. Stella knew her sister. When Vanessa's eyes wore that far-off look, and her answers came slowly, sometimes unreasonably, Vanessa should be in her library.

Stella knew Vanessa would not have written novels had she been a happy woman; happy women do not write. But, ignorant of all she missed, she found the world that suited her, when she was alone, with her pen in her hand. And the necessity for the anodyne was upon her now when her disappointment over Sebastian's relinquishment of Eton was acute, and her physical consciousness was warring with her speech, on the subject of David's health.

Stella released her from attendance on the condition that she wrote her first chapter. And Vanessa was grateful for the sympathy and understanding.

Therefore when Sebastian came home, full of his announcement, he was met by the news that his mother was in her study, and not to be disturbed; that his father had come home with a bad headache, and gone straight to his room.

Sebastian dined alone, and felt rather flat. He lounged about, and criticised his mother's china, tried the paper, and found it dull, took up a novel, pitched it away again, and was just about to go round to Weymouth Street, when the servant came in to tell him if he wouldn't mind going upstairs his father would like to see him.

Sebastian was little fonder of a sick room than Vanessa, although his sensitiveness was of a different order, more natural, and less cultivated, He was ashamed of that of which Vanessa was proud.

But David had the window open, there was a full moon, and there was no other light in the room. In its pallor, David looked very grey, he was lying on his back, and he smiled at Sebastian. The boy thought it a dear face, a rush of emotion seized him, wordless.

"I hope you didn't mind coming up," David began.

"Feeling better?"

"Oh, yes, I'm all right again. I could have come down, but I always think you and your mother talk better without me."

"The mater didn't turn up. She has got an attack of inspiration on, and has sported her oak."

"So I just heard. I'm sorry you had to dine alone."

"I would have had it up here with you if you'd have sent down word."

"I only wanted a little soup. Were you doing anything this evening? I don't want to keep you."

"No! I rather wanted to talk to you. Bu are you fit to talk? Pain gone?"

"I'm all right."

David wanted to talk to Sebastian; he had been thinking, and thinking. His conscientiousness was suffering. Business was contracting. instead of expanding, his best energies had been used up; John and William were growing old. Expenses seemed always increasing. Vanessa bought china, Sebastian was luxurious in his tastes. He could grudge neither of them anything. But he was a business man, and he saw rocks ahead. For months, perhaps years, it had been in his mind that Sebastian should know how things stood. He did not think Dr. Gifford was right in his diagnosis, it was more than indigestion that was robbing him of his strength, the future was not clear. He was troubled about many things, and sleep was more and more difficult. In the long nights he was wearied with anxiety, and the doubt as to what course to pursue. He came nearer, and ever nearer, to the decision to take the boy into his confidence. Yet ever he hesitated to trouble his youth. To-night the pain had so weakened him, his solitude of thought, and hours of indecision, had so unnerved him, that he had sent for Sebastian to tell him everything.

Sebastian tilted back his chair, put his feet on the bed, and talked. David lay and looked at him, at the slip of a boy so vivid and egotistic, with a great pride in his eyes, and a greater love. If only he could keep him untroubled! Already he was feeling better, stronger. After all, there might be years of work in front of him.

"When do you go to Scotland?"

"I am not so sure I'm going at all. I have rather changed my plans."

"Tell me about them; it does me good to listen."

"Sure you ought not to be quiet?"

"I have so many hours quiet; I don't sleep very well."

"The mater can't stand a sick-room," Sebastian said, apologetically.

But not a shadow of reproach must rest on Vanessa. David was quick to answer:

"I like to be alone when I am not well. Your mother knows that, she has her work to do, and your Aunt Stella leans on her, looks to her for companionship."

"She has Bice."

"Well, haven't I got you?"

"You are going to have rather more of me than you bargained for."

Now he could bring out his bomb-shell. He did not want that his heart should ache for his father. It must be pretty awful lying by himself in this dingy room; perhaps what he was going to tell him would cheer him up.

"I went down to Queen Victoria Street this afternoon," he began, abruptly.

"Queen Victoria Street? Did you? I'm glad of that. I didn't go back to the office. You were quite right to call on your uncles. I'm sure they were pleased. Did Uncle William say anything to you," there was a shade of anxiety in his voice, "about business?"

"I said something to him."

"You?"

"I told him I wanted to join them."

"You told them——"

David sat up in his surprise, in his excitement. Sebastian was quite satisfied with his effect.

"You lie down," he said, patronisingly, "and I'll tell you all about it."

He proceeded to describe the interview with his uncles. David was nervously excited, and interested in every detail of the conversation. He forgot everything, for the moment, but that the secret dream of his heart was to be realised, a son of his would

carry on the tradition of the old firm! He thanked the boy over and over again, it was pathetic to see his gladness in it. But quickly he began to doubt, to question. Did Sebastian realise what he was doing? Was he sacrificing himself because William or John had suggested it; was it his, David's, fault, that Sebastian had guessed his hopes?

David, as the moments went by, and he realised what the boy was telling him, tried to banish himself, and his wishes, from the whole matter, and impersonally, to make Sebastian think again of the step he contemplated. David talked of difficulties, and disappointments. Sebastian, with ingenious candour, pointed out that chaps of his calibre so seldom went into business. He had not the slightest doubt that when that was taken into account difficulties would disappear. Listening to him, David, perhaps, thought so too. It was, probably, the best hour in David's married life. His secret pride in the firm, his great pride in Sebastian, the vision of the future with the boy by his side, compensated him for so much that he had suffered and feared. He saw himself introducing the young Etonian to customers, hearing him argue, and persuade, he allowed himself to be carried away by Sebastian's optimism; it was only new blood that was needed, new vigour and enthusiasm.

And then David began to talk, he had not talked so much for years; he opened himself out to the boy, told him business secrets, of negotiations that had been brought to satisfactory conclusion, of orders pending or given. For the moment, he saw the bright side of everything. He forgot that but an hour ago he had seen the necessity of exposing a dwindling *clientèle*, a diminished profit, a shrinking of capital value, and commercial possibility. There were no orders nowadays for books like Walter Rothschild's, or

Millais' "Wild Game," no unlimited commissions. But Sebastian's announcement made everything appear more hopeful. The days of hand-made paper no longer seemed numbered, no American enterprise seemed now to be knocking at the door of established interests.

David had his hour; it was characteristic of him to shorten it through consideration of others than himself.

"But what will your mother say?" There was the question that took the savour from his new happiness. Sebastian met it easily.

"There will be a row, of course," he said, easily; the "row" would be half the fun. Sebastian understood, little less clearly than David, with what contempt Vanessa regarded the source of her luxuries. And her ambitions for her son were a no less open secret.

"But she has got a lot of common sense," he urged. "She will give in when she knows my mind is made up. She had set her heart on my staying on at Eton, and going in for the Newcastle, but I soon brought her over to my way of thinking. Don't you worry about the mater, you leave it to me; I can manage her."

But David had his misgivings, his deep misgivings. Vanessa despised P. and A. Rendall and Co. He could not help being cheered and encouraged by Sebastian, but his great content was troubled.

It was finally decided between the two that Vanessa was not to be told for the moment. Her mind was full of the new book, and it was not fair to distract her further. The news could wait. Meanwhile David thought Sebastian should pay his visit to Scotland, he should take some holiday before starting work, the new gun must be used.

Before Sebastian left his father that night, David

tried to tell him what he had been to him. Sebastian wanted his father to know he was glad of the chance of showing his love and his gratitude. But neither of them found the right words.

"We'll work the old show into a boom, won't we?" said Sebastian, as he leant over and kissed him good-night. "You'll call it P. and A. Rendall and Son? I suppose I shall be a partner?"

"Well, not all at once." David smiled again, but he was very moved. "We mustn't hurt your uncles' feelings."

"They will be jolly glad to have me, they said."

"The partnership will come in time."

Sebastian fortunately spared him the motor, the mahogany, and the commissionaires, so that David, in another sleepless night, had only Vanessa's reception of the news to trouble him.

For the next few days, however, the matter remained in abeyance. The first chapter progressed, Stella's convalescence required all of Vanessa that could be spared from the book, and father and son were practically left to each other.

Sebastian grew in intimacy with his father in these days. The deeper he saw into David's mind, the more definite grew his allegiance. David expounded his commercial creed. Sincerity, punctuality, an open and honest profit, was the basis of it. Commercial integrity was religion to him. No consideration of gain must alter the standard, the name must shine clear. The word of P. and A. Rendall stood, and must stand, for more than the bond of any other firm. Proudly he told of connections of thirty years where there had never been a contract, nor pen put to paper.

"It is enough when we say we will undertake to supply a certain quality, or to a certain date. They never bind us down, none of our customers treat

us as they do other people with whom they have dealings." He mentioned various houses, and dilated upon his standing with them. Vanessa might have despised all this talk and pride, but it held Sebastian.

He went twice with his father to the City, and enjoyed his new consequence at the office, and the new interest of his uncles. He liked them to talk before him, to handle the samples of paper, to feel he was being treated as a man, and one who must eventually inherit all the knowledge and interests they had accumulated. That which had at first been an honest sacrifice of inclination assumed a different aspect. He was enjoying himself in his unaccustomed position. His father and uncles grew at times quite enthusiastic over the diplomacy that was required, the tact in reconciling conflicting interests, and satisfying exacting clients. He heard of the intrigues of competitors, and the way to combat them, the intricacies of finance, and the mysteries of bills .of exchange. And the relation of this trade warfare made a new man of David, his eyes brightened, his figure was more alert, he grew animated, almost well. The boy wanted to begin at once. That whatever they could do, he would do better, was ingrained in him. And what an audience they would make ! Already he saw them in the background, applauding.

Vanessa, waking to mundane things a few days later, found this intimacy between father and son. It hurt, or vexed her, somehow.

She was dining out that night, and whilst she was dressing, she analysed her feelings. She recognised that her jealousy of David and Sebastian was rather mean. After all, they were father and son. She must not allow her pride in the boy, and his Ventom inheritance, to hurt David. She had been careless of them both these last few days. There is some-

thing wonderful about a first chapter. She knew it had absorbed more of her than she could justly spare. But out of her library she was unaccountably worried. Stella's illness had sapped her nervous system. Stella understood Vanessa. Vanessa prided herself that she knew Stella. It must be the nervous system, because Stella, who had borne all her troubles with gaiety of spirit, and light humour, had been depressed this time, had admitted to secret weeping, had asked Vanessa to give her what time she could spare.

Stella's pride had usually forborne to urge what Vanessa was always glad to give. But lately she had not foreborne to show that she needed her sister's love.

Vanessa thought of all these things as she dressed. She became even more convinced that a novelist should have no human ties! And then, with an irrational satisfaction, she remembered Sebastian was going with her to the St. Maurs. She would have him all to herself in the brougham, note him among the other guests, feel her pride in possession. She thought he was distinguished looking, his evening-clothes became him. She had refused the invitation for herself and David. But when Mrs. St. Maur had written that her son would like to renew his acquaintance with Sebastian, she had yielded to pressure and cancelled her refusal.

"It will be rather a bore, won't it?" Sebastian asked in the brougham.

"I don't think so. I think you may enjoy it. The St. Maurs are lion-hunters in a small way, and the asses' skins are generally humorously prominent. What have you been doing all day. I am sorry I have been so uncompanionable."

"I've been to the City with the pater."

"To the City!" she repeated in surprise. "I thought you were there last week."

"Well! the pater has been going every day for thirty odd years."

"The pater!"

But the brougham had drawn up at the St. Maurs, and he had no time to tell her more.

CHAPTER VIII

THE St. Maurs lived in Devonshire Place, in a large over-decorated, over-furnished house permeated by servants. There was a butler, stout as an archbishop, many powdered footmen, velvet breeched, every appurtenance that could proclaim the wealth of the St. Maurs was supplied with a lavish hand. They were very modern, even their name was new. Twelve or fourteen years ago it had been Isaacs. They were not, however, typically Isaacs ; any more than they were typically St. Maur. They were cousins, and had married for love, spending their first years together in poverty. How they had acquired wealth was something of a mystery. A sewing machine syndicate that went into bankruptcy can hardly have accounted for the whole of it. Yet it was after the collapse of the only speculation in which Moritz Isaacs was known to have been engaged, that he became Hilary St. Maur, and moved from Portsdown Road, to Devonshire Place, where the comedy of their social progress was played to an ever-increasing audience.

Mrs. St. Maur started with the idea that their medical neighbours must be propitiated. She underwent an operation for appendicitis the necessity for which a dose of salts might have obviated. She took a rest cure later on, on the advice of a heart specialist who had captured the organ of a popular novelist, and become the hero of one of her books. Mrs.

St. Maur had the harmless tonsils of her children removed, and even invented adenoids for them, in an ambitious moment. She was contemplating inoculation with a brand new microbe, to cure a fortunate boil of Hilary St. Maur, when she discovered that, socially, the Harley Street medicos had no status, and that their wives had no style!

Then she joined a Bridge club, and revelled for a few months among obscure titles, deeming herself very smart, delighted at the censure of Father Vaughan. The air of the club was thick with scandal, the relations between the lady and gentleman secretary more than suspect—and the upshot was in the Law Courts, unsavoury and conclusive. This cured Mrs. St. Maur of Bridge, but nothing could cure her of the wish to rise.

The ambitions of the St. Maurs were wholly admirable. They desired to be considered artistic, literary, and above all things, cultured. Probably the extraordinary stupidity of Mrs. St. Maur accounted for the final illusion that they had attained their desire. She talked house decoration with a specious gentleman, representing an Oxford Street firm, and the white walls and *carton pierre* decorations of the Devonshire Place house was the disastrous result.

She bought pictures and bronzes on the same advice, and often quoted his dicta on contemporary art, and artists. He had a very high opinion of the Hon. John Collier, whose *flamboyant* portrait of Mrs. St. Maur pervaded the dining-room, but he thought nothing at all of William Nicholson, or James Pryde, whose priceless drawings of the two children were therefore banished to the school-room!

The Jew is always a collector, however. And now the St. Maurs collected guests. They had apparently, no friends, and they had risen beyond their relations. The people they gathered around

their hospitable table were a heterogeneous set of disconnected individuals, bearing names one knew vaguely. They had generally to be introduced to host or hostess, coupled with an explanation.

What then brought Vanessa Rendall here?

Sebastian, in his very early days, had been sent to a day school in Somerset Street, where Reginald St. Maur was a pupil. Sebastian had been asked to tea, to a children's party, Mrs. St. Maur had called upon Vanessa. But the acquaintance had made little progress, the desire for it was so completely one-sided. Dr. Gifford attended both households, and that was something of a link. The boys were together again at their preparatory school. They were not friends, there was as little in common between them as between their parents, but they knew each other. And it became increasingly difficult to decline invitations, couched in terms such as these.

"I am sure, dear Mrs. Rendall, you would like to meet your sister novelist, Mrs. D'Ekroyd Baker, who is longing to make your acquaintance . . ." or, "I do hope you are disengaged this day month, Mr. Grotz, who, as you know, has painted *the* great religious picture of the century, is honouring us with his company . . ." or, "We have been so unfortunate until now with our dates. Can you join us on the 15th? Reggie is home from Harrow and would so like to meet Sebastian again. You say your husband is an invalid, and rarely dines out, will you not bring your son instead? Lady de Cliffe is coming, her husband is *the* great pigeon shot. . . ."

The velvet breeched, powdered footman passed the names from one to another, and Mrs. and Mr. Rendall were duly announced to a drawing-room of which the prevailing feature was white plaster ornamentation. The walls were panelled in crimson

satin, and formed the background for a number of people in the wrong clothes, awkward in their carriage, disconnected in their grouping, giving a general impression of being hired for the occasion, of not being "society" in the ordinary acceptation of the word. From these groups there emerged a fluffy hostess in glasses, an extravagantly thin host, also in glasses, a diminutive dark son, and an extraordinarily fat girl of about sixteen, who, it may be incidentally mentioned, was banished to the schoolroom before dinner was served.

Mrs. St. Maur was a little overwhelming in her gratitude to Vanessa for honouring them with her presence. Mrs. St. Maur had an affected voice, and too much manner. Arthur St. Maur was so gentlemanly that one would have taken him for a gentleman if he would have misbehaved himself ever so slightly. He, too, had adopted his wife's high falsetto voice, and he shook hands from an angle that had been fashionable in '94. Sportsmanship was his speciality; having skated several times at Olympia, he considered himself an Olympian athlete.

"Do you play golf?" he asked Vanessa, as he offered her his arm. "No? Then I suppose you hunt, or perhaps you play croquet; croquet is becoming quite a fashionable amusement? I saw the other day that Lady Aline Summers had taken part in a tournament!"

"Mind you keep Mrs. Rendall amused," Mrs. St. Maur had said.

Vanessa, taking stock of her surroundings, began to think she need not make much effort.

Sebastian and Reggie had nodded to each other with the non-committal air of the public school boy, taking in each other's "get up," at a glance.

"He *is* sidey, a regular Etonian," Reggie thought,

being an Harrovian, and used to having his thoughts ready made for him.

"Got his father's beak, and promises to inherit his mother's figure; poor little beast! I must be civil to him," was Sebastian's reflection. They went in to dinner together, and hated it.

The table was laden with exotic flowers, a miniature fountain sent up continual sprays of scent. There was a bouquet of pink roses for every lady, and a buttonhole of lilies for every gentleman. The table linen was heavily inlaid with lace, all the glass was Venetian, and the dinner service was of gold, luxury seemed to have said its last word.

The company upon which it was lavished seemed strange in such surroundings. Vanessa listened to her host, his dark face inclined deferentially to her; he was trying to find her taste. He was ready to enthuse on any subject, would meet her views, or opinions, speak in praise of Catholicism, or of the ingenuity of the three card trick. He was there to make himself agreeable to the guest of the evening. He tried everything but silence. Yet that would have best pleased Vanessa, who was interested in the *mise en scene*. She could just see Sebastian at the other end of the table. He was not talking to Reggie; he looked bored, but nodded to her, and raised his wine glass.

There was an Irish novelist who looked like a lobworm, and a minor poet, long-haired and hungry. Both these Vanessa knew, but the majority of the other diners were strange to her. When she found her host liked to be asked who was this, or the other, and was proud of his guests, she had no hesitation in satisfying her curiosity. She learned that the lady with a red nose, and a number of gold hairpins holding together an untidy yellow wig, wrote wonderful serials for the *Evening Meteor*,

and that the little fair man with the waxed moustache was the author of the most successful novel of the season. She had never heard of this successful novel, but surveyed its author with the interest her host seemed to expect. There was a lady in an 1889 tea-gown, who, she was told, composed acrostics, and an Indian in native dress who, it was understood, would presently recite. Mr. and Mrs. George Sterry were stars, in their way, and so was Miss Margaret Stiltson. But the St. Maurs knew now that the social vogue of the actor and actress was no greater than that of the doctor's wives, and her host mentioned these apologetically.

Vanessa became aware, presently, of a pair of green, iridescent eyes surveying her with some interest. She saw a fair head, that had evidently been dressed by a good hairdresser, a green and gold bodice that meant Jay's or Paquin, of a superb chain of uncut emeralds.

"Who is the little lady in green, with the emeralds?"

"That is Lady Hilda de Cliffe. Her husband is a famous shot, she is a great favourite with a Royal Prince!" He dropped his voice when he conveyed this information.

After the long dinner was over, all the extravagance of the menu discussed and ended, Vanessa found herself interested only in the Prince's favourite.

Lady Hilda had preceded her hostess into the drawing-room, and lent but a careless ear to her gush. She sank into the most luxurious chair the room commanded, and said, so that anybody might hear:

"Who is the woman in black *crêpe de chine?* I want to talk to her; bring her over to me."

It was superfluous for Mrs. St. Maur to explain to Vanessa that Lady Hilda desired an introduction.

It was a custom of the house for the host and hostess to find themselves ignored. Vanessa and Hilda smiled at each other, the *rapprochement* was effected without words.

"It is a treat to meet a frock like yours in this rag-bag, or to see a woman walk across the room as if she had a pair of legs that matched," was Lady de Cliffe's unconventional beginning.

Vanessa had indeed a charming figure, and held her well-shaped head erect, her dark eyes were very bright, and she looked young for her years. The dark hair, with its one white strand, was surmounted by a diamond coronet, of exquisite workmanship. Vanessa had the dress instinct, although her attractiveness was independent of her clothes. She liked none but simple things, and by definitely adopting, and keeping true to her standard, she achieved an asceticism informed by distinction. Hilda admired her, and told her so, quite frankly after a few commonplaces had been exchanged. But Hilda de Cliffe had little traffic with the commonplace.

"Mrs. St. Maur has just told me who you are. Do you know that I have all your books, bound in very light grey, undressed leather, with hammered silver corners. I never can read a novel until it has been rebound, can you?"

"I am your exact antithesis. I must have my modern literature quite fresh, preferably in MSS. at the worst in proof. All my publishers indulge my idiosyncrasies, and send me their books before publication."

"I should like to talk to you about your books; are you very sensitive about them?"

"Not inordinately, I think."

"The woman novelist bores me to tears. But your novels are so extraordinary sexless that they interested me. I only came here to-night because

I heard you were coming, and I wanted to talk to you, to get at your secret."

"My secret?"

"Yes! I suppose you did not know you had one! Looking at you, I find it fairly simple to guess. You are *demi vierge;* you have never loved, nor suffered, nor lived intensely for one single hour. You are virtuous, simple. . . ."

She uttered her impertinences with such a charming air that Vanessa, although she flushed, was not really offended.

"Did my books tell you all this?"

"They told me a great deal of it. It is unusual to find so much paradox, and so little humanity, in an English novel. Of course it is all right for me, I like that sort of thing, it is such a change. You see, *I live*, all the time I live." One could not look at her red lips, and smiling eyes, the invitation of her, and doubt it. "I believe you are worse than innocent, you are ignorant." She laughed delightedly at having discovered it.

Vanessa had not had much to endure in the way of criticism. She had ever been one of the spoilt children of the press. In the first place, she knew the right people, in the second, it had become a habit with the literary journals to praise the finished workmanship, the undeniable style, and technique, of the daughter of John Hepplewight-Ventom. Her small, eclectic public remained always faithful. There was intellect in her novels. Hilda described them:

"They are morally restful; all phrase and no feeling. We smile, but we never laugh, we are told of emotions, but there is no throb, the refinement of your men and women characterises every conversation, and cramps every situation. It is extraordinarily clever of you to have avoided dullness. For nothing is so dull in real life as well-bred men and women who "retain their composure

under any stress of feeling." She quoted the words mockingly.

"Stressful moments are few. Good manners tell all the time."

"You are quite good looking," the other said, meditatively. "I wonder . . . I wonder no man has ever startled, or taught you the things that are not in your books."

Vanessa flushed again:

"I ought to have told you, I thought you knew; I am married; I have a grown-up son, he is here with me to-night."

Hilda de Cliffe burst out laughing.

"I believe you must have been to Girton. There is nothing between that, and suburbanism, to account for you! And your clothes redeem you from the last reproach. Dear woman, I like you, I want to see more of you. You must come and visit me in Curzon Street."

"I should like to," Vanessa answered, impulsively, although already her circle of acquaintances was very large, and she was not given to promiscuous calling.

"And introduce me to your son. You are much too young to have a grown-up son. I suppose he has been neglected, and is *gauche* and impossible, hairy and ill-mannered. I am always so sorry for the children of clever women. I knew two girls once, whose mother was an M.D. and a militant suffragette. They came to a party at Lord Pomfort's, my step-father-in-law, you know. Good Heavens! I can see them now; in filthy, dirty dresses that looked as if they came out of a theatrical wardrobe, white cotton stockings, one with a hole, green satin slippers down at heel. Ugh! Yes, I must see your son."

Vanessa could afford to smile. She stayed beside her strange fellow guest until the men came up.

Hilda caught the quick glance that flashed between her and Sebastian.

"Impossible!" she exclaimed.

"It really is."

"But he has quite an air."

"His grandfather was John Hepplewight-Ventom," she answered, simply.

"I know. But he has been brought up by a female novelist!"

Sebastian, slender and graceful, his clothes well put on, and his manner completely assured, approached.

"And so you really are Mr. Rendall," Hilda began, caressingly, putting out a jewelled hand.

"Was there ever any doubt about it?" he answered, dropping easily into a chair beside her.

"Lady de Cliffe thinks you must have been neglected."

"I have suffered just the other way," he said lightly. "I have had too much attention."

"Unlike your mother," she said, mischievously, "who tells me she has had none."

Sebastian looked up inquiringly. But Arthur St. Maur bore down upon them.

"I want you to come into the other room with me. Mademoiselle Nigaska is just going to begin; she is giving us an Indian love song."

Hilda refused to move. She said she wanted to talk to Mr. Rendall. Sebastian was more than satisfied to remain. Lady Hilda reminded him of Pleasey. He wished he could see Pleasey dressed like this; he was sure she had more hair, a better figure.

On their way home Vanessa asked him what had been the subject of their conversation.

"She talks like the people in your books," was his summary, after attempting a synopsis, and failing to satisfy himself; he added: "I rather like it. Who is she? she asked me to come and see

her. Thundering good dinner, wasn't it? Reggie is Harrow all over, a regular little bounder."

"You were not bored then?"

"No! I liked that hot lobster stuff in the gold saucepans. The asparagus ice was good, too. I say, they must have tons of money. I suppose Reggie will get the lot. He talks of nothing but girls. I promised to introduce him to Bice; she'll teach him what he looks like." Then he yawned.

"I wonder what the pater has been doing?"

"Also yawning, probably," she replied, following their example.

CHAPTER IX

SEBASTIAN had not yet broken his great news to his mother. It was difficult to obtain her undivided attention, she was absorbed in the opening chapters of the new book. He might have told her on the night of the St. Maurs' dinner, but the moment seemed inappropriate.

He talked about it with his father, and David, weak himself, and dreading the moment, counselled delay.

"You are going to take a few days shooting before you start work. Wait until you come back. There is no hurry. Perhaps by then Aunt Stella will be out of town, the first chapters finished, and everything easier."

"What are *you* going to do?"

"Oh! never mind about me. I am all right again, perhaps I will go away for a little, later on. Uncle William is having a fortnight now. Uncle John ought to have a change."

"The Mater is going on a round of visits in September, she tells me. Why don't you go with her? I'll be back by then; I'll take your place in Queen Victoria Street. I shall know all about it in next to no time."

"We shall see."

David was nervously anxious for Sebastian to take holiday, nervously anxious to put off the communication to his mother; full of thought for every one but himself.

Sebastian was stocked, and over-stocked, with clothes and money. He had ammunition enough to decimate a moor. Waterproof leggings were purchased, and all the necessities and gear for duck shooting, and grouse driving, deerstalking, and every conceivable form of sport! That he eventually missed a rabbit, and peppered a keeper, never became public. But at least he refrained from boasting of his exploits.

Vanessa used his absence to finish her first and second chapters. She was habitually a slow writer. When she had packed off Stella to the Isle of Wight, and Sebastian to the moors, she could devote herself with an easy mind to the embroglio she was bringing about in "*Between the Nisi and the Absolute.*" David knew how to keep out of her way.

Only one incident disturbed her working hours. And that was a visit to Lady de Cliffe. She had called, the day after the party at the St. Maurs, leaving her own, and Sebastian's, cards. A week later she received a hurried scrawl, saying the writer was ill, and yearned to see Vanessa again, begging her to come and sit with her. She added, naively, that every one else was out of town. It was the candour of it that appealed to Vanessa.

She walked to Curzon Street that afternoon. Lady de Cliffe lived in a narrow, ill-built house, with a blue door. It was next but one to a public-house, and the aroma from the licensed premises came to Vanessa as she stood on the step. A foreign man-servant let her in, with apparent reluctance. She was shown into the white-painted, meretricious drawing room, to find her hostess alone, huddled up over the fire, looking ill, rather dishevelled, altogether different from her expectations. The house too, was a shock, everything about the narrow hall, and the staircase, hung with caricatures and sporting prints, seemed

out of keeping with the brilliant little woman, who had talked so entertainingly of modern literature.

Lady de Cliffe, however, was undoubtedly pleased to see her visitor; she made her sit by the fire, and instructed the soiled foreigner to bring up tea immediately, and to say she was out, should anyone call.

"Isn't this house dreadful?" she asked Vanessa, almost in the first breath. "We took it, furnished, five years ago. I dislike it so much that I have never been able to give it up. It belongs to that woman who kidnapped Lord Loftus; you know who I mean, Rothwell's eldest son. She was forty something, and he was nineteen. Her first husband was a brewer, but she is not even wealthy. Rothwell was delighted, there is something wrong about the boy, I don't know exactly what, and she takes care of him. He is never likely to have children, so the succession is secured for the second son, whom his father adores. Loftus gets an infinitesimal allowance, and she travels about with the title, and keeps him out of mischief, and always *en evidence*. This is her house. Did you notice the caricatures? they are cut out of illustrated papers. In my bedroom there are some Christmas numbers, framed, and all 'dear Marie Corelli's' books are in that case!"

She indicated a white painted cupboard, the top decorated with modern Dresden figures. The white, machine-made, furniture was upholstered in light blue damask. The curtains matched it, the carpet had a blue centre, and a border of pink roses. Everything was hideously *en suite*.

"I suppose you wonder how I can live here? Hugh cannot bear the place, he has only slept one night in it, in five years."

"That must be dull for you."

Vanessa was out of her surroundings, a little at sea, it was all new to her. She was attracted, repelled, but above all things interested. She had

never before met any one so like the people she invented. Hilda, although she was shivering over the fire, obviously depressed and out of spirits, roused herself to laugh at the suggestion that she must be dull without her husband.

"Oh! Hugh and I hardly ever meet; we agree so marvellously that we are afraid to spoil it. He is generally racing, when I'm in London; or, perhaps, it is baccarat, and pigeons. He is always busy. I met him last year at Monte Carlo. I rather think he had a lady with him, for he was horribly *distrait*, and afraid lest my feelings should be hurt! I lent him my jewellery to pay her off, he told me she was spoiling his shooting average."

The advent of tea for the time stopped the confidences. The tea was abominably served, and of inferior quality. Every time Vanessa got up to go Hilda begged her to remain. She went on talking:

"No, I'm not really ill," this was in response to a question, "but I got hopelessly bored at Newmarket, and Hugh insisted on calling in the village idiot, who practises medicine in that part. He practised on me to such an extent that I ran away. He took the liberty of suggesting I had appendicitis. I believe he would have insisted on that disfiguring operation if I had stayed in bed another hour. I came to town, and saw Dr. Gifford. . . ."

"My Doctor Gifford?"

"I don't know whether he is yours, I rather thought he was mine. He asked me whether I had ever been a victim of the morphia habit." She shot an inquiring glance at Vanessa, but obviously no whisper had reached her. "I was in bed, but he said he would have me on the sofa in a day or two. Wasn't it enterprising of him?"

Half of Hilda's talk went over Vanessa's head, but the other half proved stimulating. It was a new sensation to meet her brain children in the

flesh. Hilda seemed only that, and she liked hearing her talk.

Lady de Cliffe said she had only once before met a living English novelist. She was full of anecdotes about this poor lady. The wife of a surgeon, deaf, and a 'typsomaniac,' she lived in lodgings in a back street in Mayfair, and rented a room, occasionally, at Westgate-on-Sea. Her cards were printed "Mrs. Herbert Mathieson-Barnes, Howard House, Mayfair. Abbotsford, Isle of Thanet."

This woman, red-haired, ungrammatical, and unsuccessful, was of course, well known to Vanessa; who had often felt sorry for her idiosyncrasies, pretensions, and poverty. She had not known of the cards, and the assumption of a house in Mayfair, an estate in the country, although she knew that having neither birth nor breeding, Mrs. Barnes laid large claim to both. Hilda posed her in a new light, much more entertaining.

After that day, Vanessa and Lady de Cliffe fell into something approaching intimacy, their incompatibility of temperament making their superficial congeniality more piquant. Hilda discovered the puritan under the paradoxist, anticipating a day of shock. Vanessa found herself on strange ground, with which she felt herself mysteriously, or half, familiar, as if she had been there in dreams.

It was the first fortnight in August. Parliament had risen late, and London was practically empty. With Sebastian and Stella both away, Vanessa had unoccupied afternoons, and twice she drove out with Lady de Cliffe, once she went to the theatre with her. The mornings were taken up with the book.

David had no such compensation.

David Rendall, all through that hot and exhausting August, remained in Harley Street, making his daily journey to the City, spending his solitary

hours face to face with an emergency that taxed, to the uttermost extent, his moral and his physical strength. He knew, far better than Sebastian, what it would mean to Vanessa to hear that all her ambitions for Sebastian were dead sea fruit, that the dreams she had dreamed, and the brilliant edifices she had built in the air, were to be demolished; that the heir of all the ages, the pride of the Ventoms, the fine flower and culmination of them, as she deemed, and rightly deemed, Sebastian, was to follow in the despised footsteps of his father, was to buy and sell in the market place, and use his gifts to chaffer in goods. David's love for her, that had taught him to stand out of her path, taught him also how hardly she would take her disappointment. Vanessa was still a girl to him, and it was true there was no maturity of knowledge, or suffering in her. She had only lived in books and dreams. So much would be taken from her when Sebastian's future, which had been her brightest phantasmagoria for eighteen contented years, faded into obscurity. David had wanted to give her everything, instead, he would take from her that which made her life complete, the pride and joy of her maternity. He knew the measure of Vanessa's love for Sebastian. North, south, east and west it was bounded by her ambition for him, and the unstable foundation of it had been the Hepplewight-Ventom tradition.

David had an intense longing for the boy's companionship, a yearning that was almost painful, to have him for the house of Rendall. He guessed how short a time was before him in which to wind up his affairs. And they were not prosperous, they were not as they seemed on the surface. Business was altering, growing more difficult, there were new methods, and new men, with whom to compete. P. and A. Rendall had not moved with

the times, and now the rushing feet of time would not lag for them to make fresh headway.

Vanessa must have her luxuries, and Sebastian his. David Rendall, in his bachelor days, had been a man of large charities, and these he could never abandon. The income to meet expenditure had been earned, but little or nothing had been added to capital. And his days were numbered. No man knew the number of them. He had demanded the truth of Dr. Gifford. Reluctantly, for it was not the nature of David Rendall to be peremptory, and here he had been insistent, Dr. Gifford had been forced to admit that it was not indigestion from which David Rendall was suffering, nor premature old age, but a well known, easily diagnosed, lesion of the heart.

"You may live until you are seventy, you may die at any moment. You force me to tell you, and that is the exact truth. You can see as many consultants as you like. I will go with you to Sir Thomas Barlock, or Dr. Badminton, or Greentree, or you can go alone. But none of them will tell you anything different, if they are honest with you. Valvular disease, that is the name by which the public know your complaint," he gave him a brief technical description. "I have seen a man, with valvular disease of the heart, live to be seventy-four. I've known another, differing from him in no appreciable way, die in his carriage on the way home from my consulting room; fortunately before my prescription was made up!"

"I am grateful to you for your candour," David had said, steadily, after a moment's pause. He looked at grey death, but the shadowy one had no terror for him. Only in the depths lay reflected the faces of his beloved, of Vanessa and Sebastian, it was they death must not hurt.

"You are a brave man, David Rendall."

"No! it isn't that. I know she will be as well, or better, without me, I have done nothing for her. But the boy . . ." his eyes were a little dim, he did not want to leave the boy.

"That boy of yours will grow into a fine fellow if you let him share responsibility with you; you will attenuate him if you give him nothing but himself for nourishment."

"But there is his mother to think of first."

Dr. Gifford had never seen eye to eye with David as to Vanessa's claims.

"I should not let his mother's views weigh too heavily with me," he said, drily, "you cannot make men out of paper and ink. Mrs. Rendall is a novelist."

"I must think what is best for her," he persisted.

It ended, the long sleepless nights, the long solitary evenings, all the thought, and well nigh desperate, desire to do what was right and best for them both, in David opening his heart fully to his son.

He wrote Sebastian a letter, the boy has it now, it made a man of him, although, of course, the material was always there. It told him his mother had the first claim upon him, and reminded him of little tender, childish things. It said that if, by accident or illness, his own life were shortened, it was true he could not leave them enough to live as they lived now, and very humbly it entreated Sebastian's pardon for this. He had been weak, but it had been a great thing for him when Vanessa had consented to be his wife, she needed some compensation, it had been his pride and happiness to minister to her; Sebastian must ever feel the same. Now it came to him that Vanessa would miss her ambition more than she would miss any other luxury, and it was only luxuries of which his death would deprive them, not necessities. He had therefore decided to take a short holiday, and rest,

as Dr. Gifford had advised; after which he felt he would be able to work again, for both of them. He was "not done yet;" he would work better for the knowledge that Sebastian had wished to be with him.

"We can talk together better now, my dear boy, and I shall often consult you, and tell you all I am doing. But you must not sacrifice your career, nothing could make up to your mother for that, we will find a way out of the money difficulties . . ." and he added something of what Sebastian's sympathy and offer had meant to him.

Sebastian had a fresh glimpse into the love his father bore to him and to his mother, the chivalry, the utter unselfishness of it.

He wrote back, in his unfinished scrawl, Etonian, and illiterate.

"Dear Gov.

"Don't rot about my career; it's bound up in P. and A. Rendall and Co. (I suppose I'm the Co. until I get to be a partner?) I'll be at the office 9. 30 on the 25th as arranged, and I expect to boss the show in about a fortnight.

"Don't funk about the mater, leave that up to me; get away as soon as you like. What about Norway? The Mater has never laid a scene on one of these steamers. I should think she'd like something new. She could chuck her autumn visits; she doesn't shoot. You can get salmon in Norway—ripping fun, salmon fishing.

"By the way, a fellow I've met here says if I'm going in the City I ought to have a rolled-top desk, and some Shannon files. I suppose you'll see to all that.

"Love to the firm. So long!

"Yours,

"Sebastian Rendall.

"(Pro Messrs. P. and A. Rendall and Co.)

"Pretty quick at the jargon, aren't I?"

CHAPTER X

VANESSA would not leave London until Sebastian returned. David did not really intend to go away at all. Always the refrain beat itself in his brain that his time was short; there was so much to do.

Lady de Cliffe left London, at last, for Newmarket, after exacting a promise from Vanessa that she would visit her there in the late autumn. Husband and wife were left to the intercourse that meant a greater loneliness for each of them than if they had been alone. Their strained silences, their yet more strained conversation, set a note of gloom about the house. And yet there was no ill will in either of them. The word incompatibility covers it all. Vanessa wished David would go away and enjoy himself. David wished every good thing for his wife; fame and fortune, even love. But for Sebastian, he had had no gift for her. Her kindness hurt him, the unspoken criticisms that he read in her eyes, when he coughed, or moved awkwardly, or spoke of what could not interest her, made life well nigh intolerable to him. But for Sebastian! There was always Sebastian's return to which to look forward.

Vanessa announced it at breakfast. It was already the 22nd.

"Sebastian will be home the day after to-morrow. He writes me he has something to tell me, some news that will surprise me. I suppose you have no idea what it is?"

David was not very good at equivocation; but Vanessa fortunately did not press her question. It had, in fact, occurred to her, almost in the act of speaking, that Sebastian had not mentioned his father, and it was possible he did not wish him to know what the matter was that he would confide in her, until they had talked it over together.

Vanessa was waiting to hear about the year or two of foreign travel, and the essential acquisition of modern languages, and to what it was to lead. She had not pressed for Sebastian's confidence, but she felt it must be diplomacy he was contemplating. Already she had been wondering if Lord Saighton's influence was still of value, and thinking how pleased Stella would be if she could be the medium to obtain it for the boy. Vanessa knew Lord Saighton had been an intimate friend of Jack Ashton's, and was still an occasional visitor in Weymouth Street. That was all she knew.

On Sunday evening, Sebastian returned.

"Hallo, mater, not gone yet? I thought you were due at the Gowers," was his greeting to his mother.

He stooped to kiss his father.

"Told her all about it?" he asked him.

Vanessa looked from one to another. She and David had been sharing the drawing-room, awaiting Sebastian's arrival. David had been even more than usually restless, and Vanessa had found it difficult to control her irritation.

"There is no sense in walking backwards and forwards to the window," she had said. "He will probably be an hour late."

David's restlessness irritated and fidgeted her. She could not know its source. His time was so short, there was so much still to do.

And Sebastian, here almost before it was possible, stopped the rush of pleasure that always came to

her with his mere presence, by his confidential smile, and quick question:

"Have you told her?"

What was there David could tell her of him?

The boy was too full of it to wait. He was boy enough to enjoy in anticipation the effect he was going to produce. In his Harris tweed travelling suit, brown tie and boots, tan gloves, every detail of his toilette studied and correct, he satisfied her eye and taste.

"Let us have tea; there wasn't a Pullman on the train, and I hate the stuff they give you at stations. Been all right, pater?"

"I'm all right, glad to see you back again. You've had a good time?"

"Simply ripping."

Vanessa was already out of tune. It was difficult to recognise that she was jealous of Sebastian's love for his father, for hers was truly not an ignoble nature. David dreaded, for her, what was to follow. When the man was bringing in the tray, he took the opportunity to ask Sebastian to wait with his news. David was very nervous; Sebastian grinned, and thought it good fun.

"That's not half enough buttered toast. I am simply famished. Bring another stack, and look sharp," he said to the butler. "Four lumps of sugar, mater. So the pater hasn't sprung our bomb shell on you! I'm going into business, joining that fine old firm, P. and A. Rendall and Co. I'm a City man from to-morrow."

She looked from one to another.

"Isn't the joke rather vulgar," she asked, "rather in bad taste?"

She poured out his tea with hands not quite steady. But it was jealousy of the smile Sebastian threw to his father, not the uncredited news, that unsteadied them. She passed him the cup.

"You ought not to make fun of your father's occupation," she said, "there is nothing to be ashamed of in business."

"That is why I'm not ashamed. What makes you think I am making fun of the pater, or joking? I'm in dead earnest; we settled it all up before I went away, didn't we, governor? I've seen uncle William, and John too. Why, mater, you've turned quite pale. You don't mean to say you really mind?"

She had turned quite pale now. There *was* some understanding or conspiracy between them, Sebastian could not know how he was hurting her. David, watching, interposed quickly:

"It was not my wish. Sebastian went on his own account, to see his uncles. . . ."

"I do not know what you are both trying to tell me; about what you are talking. You don't suppose I am going to submit to this degradation of my boy?"

"Degradation! What rot, mater! Come down off the high horse; if it's good enough for the pater, it's more than good enough for me; you'll admit that."

Vanessa lost her sense of proportion, and her self-possession:

"You are in a very different position," she said, quickly. "You are my son."

"So I have always heard."

David got up from his chair:

"I think I'll go upstairs a little."

David could not bear to see Vanessa in this mood, to think of her in her conflict with Sebastian.

"No! don't go away, governor. Mater will see my point of view in a minute. I am eighteen, the governor is fifty. He works ten hours a day so that you and I can have all we want."

"My dear boy!"

"Oh! do let me finish. Well! I'm not taking

any more. You are a woman, and entitled to it. I'm a man and I'm not. So I am going to do my share, that is all."

She turned a bitter glance on David. All the revulsion of her marriage, all her hatred of its old disregarded claim, was in it.

"So that is the meaning, and the intrigue, of your attacks of illness?"

David's heart warned him. But he must think of her first, he must keep steady, and not lose sight of her point of view.

"Don't say anything more," he pleaded, "don't let us discuss it before the boy. Sebastian, wait, your mother is always right, perhaps you have been too hasty in your decision."

Vanessa must not say words she might regret, bitter things that might one day come back to her. He pleaded to her for silence, and with an effort she regained a measure of control.

Sebastian had actually finished his tea. He pushed his cup away, and stood up.

"Don't you go, pater, stay and talk it over with her, whilst I put myself in some other togs. I suppose she knows all you've told me?"

He looked quickly from one to another of his parents, he knew little of the position between them, children are slow to recognise a division between mother and father, if both hold their parenthood sacred, but his brain was of exceptional quality, and his instincts acute.

"Don't bully the pater. After all, it's my own wish, and not his. You will realise your ambitions, right enough, mater. 'The Napoleon of the Paper Trade' they'll call me. See if they don't!"

From the door, still not quite satisfied at what he was leaving behind, he added, good-humouredly:

"You know, mater, Milton had a jolly poor time compared to Vanderbilt."

There was nobility in Vanessa, the future proved it. Also, one in whom the elements were lacking could hardly have inspired all David felt for her. Had he been able to speak to her, even then, as he had written Sebastian, had he been able to make her realise what she was doing, it had been well for both of them. But he was never quite at ease, or fluent before her. She had written novels, inventing puppets, and endowing these, whilst other women were sharing human thoughts with men and women. He had thought, by leaving her leisure for her puppets, standing between her and the world, he had been feeding her greatest need.

Now she used her cultured gift of phrase to bite into him her intolerance and anger.

"When was the foundation stone of this conspiracy first laid," she asked, when the door had closed. Since she and David were antagonists, she would fight him with her own weapons. "I suppose you were corresponding with him all this last term at Eton, with the view to shortening his stay there?"

Vanessa might be antagonistic to him, but he was no match for her in speech; and if he had been, there was no feeling but sympathy with which to point his weapon.

"It was almost as great a surprise to me as to you; don't take it too hardly. Let him try it, we shall not bind him to anything."

"You will not chain him physically to the desk," she replied, bitterly. "You have chained him with gifts, entangled him with sentimental appeals to some childish feeling he had for you; you move him with an affectation of physical weakness, and incapacity."

"Affectation!"

"And because of your claim on him, you would drag him down, selfishly, to your own level."

David's eyes were a little dim. How she must

be hurt, to try and wound him, to voice that which she had tried always to conceal. The contempt hardly touched him, he had always known it there, and in his fine humility accepted it as reasonable.

"I make no claim on him, on either of you," he answered.

That touched her a little, and she wavered in her indictment. She tried now, in her own way, to hold the scale even.

"He is only half educated. I have been laying the foundation on which to erect a scholar. To undermine my influence, all I have been working for all these years, was mean, mean. Now I know why he gave up the Newcastle."

"No."

"Not directly perhaps. But you have appealed to his feelings."

"Not consciously."

"That is possible. I do not want to be unjust," she was softening a little. David was making no fight: she would have him on her side, she thought, quickly, if she would bring her argument down to the level of his intelligence.

"I do not want to be unjust," she repeated. "I see what has occurred. You have been run down, not in your normal health. Instead of recuperating, you have followed the line of least resistance, you have thought of getting help, some one to do your work for you; and Sebastian was the nearest. I am sorry if I spoke too harshly, you will understand it was a great shock to me that Sebastian should even think of abandoning his career, in order to buy and sell paper in the City. I don't suppose, for a moment, you can see things from my point of view. To you, it was a strong young arm upon which to lean, a prop for your old age. But to me . . . Sebastian is so much more than that."

She really thought Sebastian was dearer to her than he was to his father! Her voice was lowered, and full of genuine feeling, as she went on: "To me, he is almost more my father's son than mine, the son of John Hepplewight-Ventom! I could give my father so little, I was so young when he died, and my own talent is but small."

She would be generous in taking David into her confidence, showing him the impossibility of what he proposed.

"Stella and Bice can do nothing for the name. Sebastian has all the gifts, music and song, the eye of a true artist, extraordinary power of acquiring knowledge, the genius to use it . . ." She broke off; she even smiled at him, making his poor heart beat more unevenly.

"When my father came to you to make the paper for his book, you never suggested you would write the monograph, and he might make the paper. Sebastian, in some ways, is greater than my father; and will go further. His perception is quicker, for one thing."

David could not sit still whilst Vanessa talked; he moved restlessly about the room, and Vanessa's eyes watched him.

She was critical of his hands, his feet, in their square-toed boots, his want of smartness. Involuntarily she added:

"He and I are so different to you."

On the surface it was true. There seemed little in common with the light and grace of Sebastian's movement, in David's springless step, nor in the boy's clear-cut Ventom features and bright eyes, with David's dullness of vision. But looking a little more intelligently from one to another, one became conscious of the same width of brow, and something of the same shaped head. Vanessa saw only herself, or her father, in the boy, but David

was there, nevertheless. Fortunately, perhaps, for the intellectual type, and Sebastian certainly had that for heritage, sinks to decadence when like marries like.

Vanessa used all the weapons in her armoury against David, phrase, and feeling, argument and allusion. She thought she had fought a good, and winning, fight when, at length, she left him. He was very wearied, exhausted, and he had said she was probably quite right, she was always right. He remained on in the drawing-room when the door closed after her, he was too tired to go upstairs just yet. He would not go to dinner, he would leave her and Sebastian to talk things out. Perhaps she would persuade the boy to change his mind; to go on with his studies, *en route* for the University. The University would be essential to almost any career that Vanessa would select for him. That meant at least four years.

In his present condition David could not look four years ahead. But it might be that she was right. Perhaps he had been selfish in wanting the boy, oblivious of his higher interests. It was difficult to gauge the advantages of a classical education if you have never had one, and at fifty years of age to create a new ideal. In David's youth, commercial integrity, and the good name of P. and A. Rendall in the City, had stood to him for all ambition. After his marriage, the effort to make Vanessa happy, content, and free, had absorbed his mind. He had none of the class sense which cramped his wife's vision. He did not appreciate the differences between the finished product of Eton, Harrow, or Winchester; the University, and perhaps the army; and the men, in so many instances superior, who were tumbled out of rough schools into City offices, and grew to hold their citizenship and their homes, higher than the exotic civilisation of Society's convention.

Apart from the greatness that was Sebastian's birthright, Vanessa incidentally insisted he must be a gentleman. David missed this distinction in her eyes. It is only when eyes have cried that vision grows clear. Vanessa had not yet cried.

Tears of passion wash away no illusions. She fought Sebastian passionately over his defection, and he met argument with ridicule, immovable standards with irreconcilable illustration.

As long as he could carefully conceal from his mother the real reason for his abrupt decision, so long as he need not touch on his father's health, nor what he felt about it, he could hold his own against her. Of course he was ashamed of anything approaching sentiment. He cared for both his parents, he was, what he called, thoroughly "pally" and intimate with them. But if there were a sentimental side to his mother's nature, he had not struck it; what he liked always about her was her quick intelligence, and appreciation of his. They were intellectually akin. They shared an impractical, limited view of life, and an esoteric consideration of literature. Also they both had egotism, a faculty for criticism, and a disproportionate appreciation of paradoxical phrase.

But when a boy like Sebastian is moved through his secret sentiment to a certain course, none of these things count, they fall into their right place.

Vanessa fought her son through a short dinner, and a long evening. David did not appear again. She used rhetoric, she appealed to his pride, she talked of what his friends at Eton would say, his tutors, and the world generally. She argued of the disgrace to her, and of the value her position in the world of letters would have been to him had he decided more worthily. But she could not move him in his determination. She even let him see her cry, she shed a hot tear or two of baffled anger.

If he must "peddle" he must, she said, finally, there was possibly a strain of hereditary vulgarity in him. He could not believe that it was to his father she was alluding, and she was quickly ashamed of having said it.

She could make him flush, she could get pin-pricks into the sensitiveness of his young Eton-softened skin, but she could not touch his decision, nor arrive at its source in this way. The feeling for David, at which she could not guess, and was not herself capable, made him immune to her assaults.

"What is the use of talking any more about it," he said, at length. "I have absolutely made up my mind that I am going into the City, that I am going to work with the pater. But I wish you wouldn't take it the way you do. We've never been like this before."

There had been in truth a beautiful sympathy between them. In a flash of painful intuition, gone almost as it came, she saw the blank place in her life if she should lose him.

"That is the point I am labouring," she got out with difficulty. "I have never crossed you, contradicted you, hardly argued with you. I have never opposed my maternity to your intelligence."

She had long ago composed the phrase, but now it sounded flat, and the rounded period held no comfort. But she had no other method of expression. She went on: "I see you sinking into the slough of commercialism, tarnishing all your brightness, voluntarily putting out your light, extinguishing the spark of genius in you. . . . I cannot keep silence, my conscience will not let me. Heaven knows with what argument he has plied you. . . ."

"You know he has not influenced me by a word, except a word to consider you, before him, or myself, or anybody," he said, reproachfully.

"You have ranged yourself with him, and against me," she cried. "I have no longer part, or share, or interest in you. League yourself with him if you insist, but leave me out of your thoughts. I have nothing in common with the life you choose."

She was angered in her pride, and jealousy, past reasonable thought, or self-restraint. All the evening, she had fought and argued, now her strength broke suddenly.

"I don't know how the future will shape for me. But I will have no part in this sacrilege you contemplate, nor countenance it with my presence. I shall go away to-morrow, and in the winter I shall go abroad. I will fill my days with work, and try what I can do that your grandfather shall not be forgotten. Ever since you were born, I have dreamed, and longed to make you worthy of your intellectual inheritance, I have thought of little else."

"It never was me you cared for then, only the ambitions you had for me, your dreams for me."

"Perhaps. I don't know. I only know you have never been out of my thoughts. I have subordinated myself where you have been concerned, that you should expand. Now I must cut you out of my life. I shall live only for literature."

"Mater, you are angry now, disappointed. You don't mean all this, you can't!"

"I mean a thousand times more. I know now that my ambition for you has given colour to all my days; that but for these dreams had all been grey. But you don't care for that, you forget all we have been to each other, you disassociate yourself from me. . . ."

"You are thrusting me away as quickly as you can," he murmured, half amused, incredulous.

"Not *you*, David Rendall's worthy son. I had never anything in common with him. In the very first year of our marriage I asked him to let me go,

to release me from such an unnatural tie. I wish I had been firm about it, and had gone before I bore him a child of whom he could rob me!"

"Oh! isn't that rot, just because I am going to make paper, instead of staining it!"

"I can't expect you any longer to look at things in the same way I do, not at this, nor anything. William and John Rendall will form your mind, not I."

She believed every word she uttered, she believed incredible things.

All that night, when she lay awake, in rage and grief, she reiterated she had lost her only son, and that now nothing was left her but the children of her brain. Sebastian had said she thrust him away from her. Well! it was true. She did not want to mother a city man, David's son. But her heart ached, ached, ached. She had not known one could suffer so. She must get away from him, begin life again, write—travel—study. She had been wrong in surrendering her place to Sebastian; she had felt that, whilst she had only talent, he had genius. Always in the background of her mind had been the day when the critics should write that his "grandfather's incomparable style" and his mother's "delicate talent" had culminated in him.

And now she told herself that all the burden borne for posterity must be hers. She was unfit to bear it, what Hilda de Cliffe said was true, it was puppets she created, not men and women. She had not known there was suffering in the world such as she felt now, then how could she write with only inexperience to be her guide? Yet had she but been able to analyse what shook her, and kept her sleepless, she would have known it was but jealousy, and a faint doubt of herself, the knowledge, that was never spared her, of David's goodness, the dim truth on the horizon that what she felt for the

name of Hepplewight-Ventom was inherently the same instinct as his pride in the unbroken succession of City Rendalls. She was almost as young as her son, undisciplined to meet disappointment.

She would leave them both, dissociate herself from them, go away, and freed from ties, would make her new book more worthy of her and her father's name than any she had yet written. The world would hold her justified. In that white night, sleepless, she cried that Sebastian should be proud of her, since she needs must be ashamed of him.

She thought it was all true, and that the ache in her heart would go, if she wrote books, and lived on in dreamland, moving the world with words. She thought that so she could recapture happiness. It is incredible one, whom many critics had praised, could believe that this was all for which God had given her a son. That she might dream of his future, plan for him, and discard him when his individuality outstripped her dreams!

CHAPTER XI

IT is possible David and Sebastian had heartache too, for Vanessa Rendall was not a woman whom one could part with easily from life and home. She had too much personality; she had the gift, or defect, of being the centre of her circle.

And she kept to her determination. She went away the next day on a round of visits, without bidding them good-bye, without giving them any indication when she would return.

David and Sebastian started their work together, getting what happiness and satisfaction they could from it. But it was all flat and savourless, because of her action. They both loved her, and this way she taught them; David had known that love can embitter life, and now Sebastian saw a glimmer of the same sad truth.

David spent much time, in those journeys to and from, Queen Victoria Street, in talking to the boy about his mother, mutely asking sympathy and forgiveness for her, dwelling on generous traits, if he could not dwell on tender ones, speaking of Vanessa's loyalty, single-heartedness, devotion to her father's memory; reminding him how he and Stella filled her thoughts, and that she had never failed either of them.

"Until now," Sebastian interrupted.

He missed her, and resented her defection. He wanted sympathy, to talk about himself, and all that he was doing, and planning. There is no doubt

that David's slowness of speech, and thought, awkwardness of expression, and movement, affected Sebastian almost as it affected Vanessa. The only difference was that Sebastian loved his father. He wanted his mother. All his years she had been part of him, they had lived in a real intimacy. She could not mean to cut him off like this. Yet his pride and her pride, were alike. He sent her no line, but plodded to the city with his father, learning his trade. And she wrote him no word of encouragement, nor help, nursing her grievance.

Vanessa's first visit was to the Gowers. Their place was in Ireland, the post town Bray. Lord Gowers was a man of seventy, bearded, taciturn, irascible. Her hostess was his second wife, the mother of sons. This had been her *raison d'être*, and remained her only claim to consideration. But the boys themselves seemed unworthy of the trouble that had been taken to secure them. Mervyn had failed to get into the Army, and Renton had been sent down from Oxford. Both were in debt, and in awe of their father. The two days she was there, before the rest of the party arrived, and the grouse shooting began, Vanessa spent in mentally comparing her boy with these two gentlemanly young loafers. They were finished products of the schools she admired, they had little or no brains, hearts, nor consciences; but their manners, and appearance were excellent. Lady Gowers thought they were both well nigh perfect, and that their father was unconscionably harsh to them. That, too, gave Vanessa food for thought, although she tried to keep thought away from her, and to banish that persistent heartache.

Lord Gowers had been a friend of John Hepplewight-Ventom. A disagreeable and cantankerous father and husband he might be, but he was no

mean scholar, and the daughter of his old friend was a congenial companion to him. He had most of Ventom's books in original editions, autographed by their author. "Umbrian Hills and Valleys," for instance, had been dedicated to him "in affectionate memory of three months' fellowship." They had journeyed together, and he liked to talk of those old days. The "Etruscan Researches," too, had pencil notes, and many reminiscences. Lord Gowers' troubles had not begun until after his second marriage, and the adolescence of the much desired heir. Their twinship was the first complication. He said it was an extraordinary coincidence that both he and his old friend should have had twin children. Incidentally he always touched Vanessa's small sense of humour when he dilated on this subject. She had often stayed at the Towers. When Sebastian was a very little boy he had been here with her. But the twins had been uncongenial companions to him, and she had never repeated the experiment.

Lord Gowers asked after him.

"He must be getting a big boy now," he said, forgetting how quickly the years passed. "I suppose you have packed him off to Eton; and begun to hear he is no good," he added, with an impatient sigh. He was full of his own disappointments, bad reports, requests to remove, superannuation, and all the rest of it. Bad training at home was Vanessa's secret explanation, but she was able to successfully conceal her view. She was not able to conceal her very different experience with her son, nor to refrain from boasting of it. Was it boasting, or only common fairness, and loyalty, to the boy who was not to count with her any more, whom she had discarded for ever?

She told Lord Gowers of what Sebastian had achieved, of scholarships, prizes, and laudatory

letters. Lord Gowers was rather bored by the relation.

"Well, well," he said, "so you are quite proud of him? He had a look of his grandfather, I thought, when I last saw him. What are you doing with him now? Balliol was your father's college, was it not, or New College? He had left Oxford before my day. It was later on, when I was in Rome, that we became intimate."

"Sebastian does not wish to go to the University," she answered, slowly. She hated to have to say it. In that beautiful old library, lofty, vellum scented, its deep mullioned windows giving on to the wooded park, she seemed so far, and so apart, from David Rendall. She and Lord Gowers had talked of Italy; suddenly she envisaged monasticism, and the middle ages, her father, and his absorption in mediævalism. Why had Sebastian left her by herself in this world that belonged to both of them?

Her host did not question her further as to where Sebastian was going. He preferred to talk with her of olden days. And she, too, thought such reminiscences would help her to escape from the pull of the cord that would not let her forget that half of her was in Harley Street.

The house filled, and there was much talk of grouse. There were motor drives, and dinner parties, bridge, politics, and religion. There was the well-bred circle, boring and bored, that the autumn always brings together. The cord vibrated painfully all the time. Vanessa found herself awake at night, wondering what Sebastian was doing, how he was faring, what City people were thinking of him. She could not banish him, try as she would. And always it was herself she doubted. She was learning, in the hardest of schools, that to be at war with one's own heart, and conscience, robs even victory of its triumph, leaves the

taste of ashes in the mouth, and the field of battle desolate.

From Sebastian there came no line; but David wrote her. There was little he could say. If he told her of Sebastian's quick powers of assimilation, of what customers said to, or of, him, of what difference his daily companionship, his ignorant, happy business optimism made, of how all the colours seemed brightened, and the future more promising, she might have resented it. David, fearful of hurting her, left out, therefore, in his short letters, all the things she was longing to hear. He wrote about the weather, or news that she could have read in the papers. He ignored that there was any estrangement between them. He hoped she was having a good time, and asked if she was making progress with the new book.

For a week of two she did not answer these letters. Then she told herself it was her duty to give them her address, and she wrote that she was leaving the Gowers, and would be with the Harlands until such and such a date, after that, with the Bowrings.

She altered her plans again, and yet again, and paid many short, restless, visits. But she could not get away from her thoughts, they persistently followed the boy, followed him into the City, home to long dull evenings. She ached for him, yet still succeeded in persuading herself that it was only over his lost chance of greatness that she was grieving!

She moved from place to place, and among different circles of people. She made long journeys—unnecessary, fatiguing. From Ireland to Scotland, and to the South of England, before going into Wales. She stayed with land owners, who cared only for the Agrarian question, and with those to whom nothing was vital but the ritualistic move-

ment, and the Catholic Church. She found herself in country parsonages where the smallest of local gossip filled dull conventional days; and once in a ducal Castle where nobody cared for anything, or anybody, but the concealment of the fact that the host was a cripple, more than half an idiot, and that wife, major domo, valet and doctor were little else than so many keepers.

She had many friends, and to some she wrote and offered herself, and many wrote to her. She was always, and everywhere, a welcome guest. But all her friends noted her changing looks. She had been extraordinarily young in her appearance, fresh and vivid, now the sleepless nights and the tug, tug, at her heart-strings were telling.

Always, before this, she had had Sebastian's childish letters to read and answer, then his boyish ones. At first there had been picture post-cards, and foreign stamps, then money, cakes, and parcels generally. At Eton he had wanted more from her. She had fallen in the way of remembering for him all the good stories she heard, all the interesting things. The tit-bits of each day were reserved for him, and much of her intelligence went into her letters. They had been almost daily, her sweetest tasks, her imagination had played with them more happily than with her literary puppets, for she could always see the boy reading, laughing, commenting, or questioning. Everything she saw or heard, read, or discovered, were for his amusement or needs. Now there was nothing.

By the end of October, her friends all palled, the days were even more tedious. And, worst trouble of all, the book dragged on her hands. The boy, whom she had discarded, came between her, and her bloodless hero, between her, and her paradoxical heroine. Their fortunes seemed hardly worth following.

The De Cliffes were her last resource. If any one could cure her of, what she told herself constantly was, merely "sentimentality," it would be Hilda de Cliffe.

Hilda would find the phrases to rescue her from mundanity, from a commonplace, unworthy longing for a boy, who, with his father, was "engaged in the City!"

Vanessa arrived late in Newmarket. She was not disappointed to find her hostess was absent from the plaform, but was surprised to be accosted by a big, thick-set man, clean-shaven, with a North Country accent, who had got out of the next carriage, and been obviously watching her movements, listening to the questions she put to the guard.

"Is there any one waiting for me? Is there a carriage from Seaton House?"

"Are you going to Seaton House? You are Mrs. Rendall, I think."

"But how did you know?"

"Well! you sent me your photograph once, and I have a good memory," he answered, quite simply.

"I sent you my photograph?" she repeated, in astonishment.

"You did indeed. Come along with me, we'll find the carriage, or one of the motors, waiting outside for us. I know their ways."

"To whom am I speaking?"

"My name is Wallingford."

"Joseph Wallingford!" she exclaimed.

"That's right. That you, Leeward? Find Mrs. Rendall's maid, and help her with the luggage. I thought so, here is De Cliffe's motor. Oh! the brougham is there too. I suppose they weren't sure you would want to come with me. What will you do?"

Vanessa elected for the motor, she was quite

ready to share it with Joseph Wallingford. She had wished to meet him, although her literary friends had dissuaded her, and told her that he was "impossible." For what she knew of him interested her.

He was a power in the North of England, the owner of a big syndicate of newspapers. He had given her, through an agent, the largest price she had ever received for a book, and having bought, he had advertised it so extensively that for some weeks she had been positively ashamed to open a newspaper, or stop at a bookstall. The portrait of which he spoke had stared at her from literary supplements, on scattered leaflets, and in blurred pulls in daily papers.

It was difficult for them to hear each other speak in the motor.

"I don't like these big machines," he said, and named the maker, "they are noisy. What is the good of a sixty horse-power machine with a twenty miles an hour speed limit?" He talked of motors, with obvious knowledge, until they pulled up at Seaton House, opposite the heath. It was a modern, unpretentious villa, behind big pretentious iron gates.

Vanessa had not met her host before. Lord de Cliffe was clean-shaven, stolid, he looked sufficiently stupid to be a soldier, and he wore an eye-glass, as if to accentuate the vacuity of his expression. Sir George Chittering was of the same type, but taller, thinner, and more elegant. Tony Hawthorn was a stable boy, grown stout, but having ridden in races, and been dubbed a jockey, his social inequality was overlooked. All three men were in the hall, smoking, and drinking whiskies and sodas. They greeted "Joe" with enthusiasm. But Vanessa seemed somewhat of a surprise to them. Lord de Cliffe was equal to the occasion, although he had

forgotten, or never been told, that she was expected. He explained that Lady de Cliffe was lying down; she had complained of headache. He introduced the others, and said he "supposed she knew Joe." Then he talked vaguely of tea, and engineered her quickly to a housekeeper, and her own room.

After which he and his friends said she "was a devilish fine woman, and they would never have guessed she was one of the 'scribbling crowd.'" They then began to talk horses, form, and the stud book, and continued doing so until it was time to dress for dinner.

Vanessa was rather chilled by her reception. Also she had expected to find a letter from David, and little as there was ever in his letters, she had begun to find herself awaiting them eagerly. But tea was brought up to her, she rested, and made her usual careful toilette.

Seaton House was less ostentatiously inharmonious than the Curzon Street establishment. It was roomy, comfortable, and only negatively ugly, in a modern, leather chair, and saddle-backed sofa, manner. Lady de Cliffe came to her before dinner, and Vanessa had never seen her look more beautiful, nor more fragile. Her manner was excitable, and she talked continuously. She was almost overwhelming in her welcome of Vanessa, and admired everything she was wearing. She stayed until it was nearly eight o'clock, and, in consequence, was twenty minutes late in making her appearance in the drawing-room, keeping dinner, and everybody waiting. She took it quite airily:

"I am not late, am I?" was all she said, in apology.

"I am so awfully hungry, let us go down at once. The soup will be cold anyhow, it always is. You are going to take me down, aren't you, Sir George?"

She went in first, talking eagerly.

Lord de Cliffe offered his arm to Vanessa. Joe Wallingford, and Tony Hawthorn, brought up the rear.

Vanessa was adaptable, and quite useful at society small talk. But she found her host difficult, and monosyllabic. It was not that he was not used to the society of women, but he had just been given so many instructions as to what he was to say, and avoid saying, he had just been told so much about Vanessa's talents, and more about her ingenuousness, that he was nervous. He floundered hopelessly, and, as he expressed it afterwards, chucked it altogether, and let Joe take it on.

Joe Wallingford was typical of an interesting class, rare in London, fairly common in the Midlands. His father had been a journeyman printer, and invented a contrivance for facilitating his labour. He patented it, and made a small fortune by dint of almost incredible exertions, first in developing, and then in pushing his discovery. But it was not until young Joe came on the scene that the fortune grew to any considerable dimensions.

The father had invented a printing machine, but the son found how to put it to account. It was many years ago, before the linotype, or the monotype, came into use, and it may be said the Wallingford was a very ingenious precursor of both. Young Joe found it difficult to persuade the contented owner of the *Workington Gazette* to use the Wallingford. So he set up a press, and brought out a weekly sheet of his own. A very small venture, at first, for providing up-to-date sporting news in a sporting district, it grew and grew, until money and advertisements began to roll in. Then a Sunday paper edition, with Saturday's football news, was added, and finally a halfpenny daily.

At the present moment, Joe Wallingford, young Joe, as he was still called by the fellow townsmen

who had known his father, had inherited the fortune he had helped his father to make, and possessed another for which he was wholly responsible. There was a *Workington Chronicle* that brought him in something like £40,000 a year, and the *Millborough Express*, worth another £28,000. And there was also the Imperial Syndicate which financed a dozen daily, evening, and weekly papers, magazines, monthlies, and cheap editions of popular novels, incidentally securing to Joe further annual £50,000 or so.

Joe Wallingford provided literature for the million. But when he heard from Vanessa, or gathered from her, that she was not dependent for her living upon her pen, he questioned her with surprise as to her motive in writing. He did not understand it. It seemed a strange, small, mercenary thing to do. Literature had no aspect for him but the pecuniary one.

"Why don't you give it up?" he urged, "if your husband can earn enough for both of you."

He did not perhaps put this in actual words, but he amused Vanessa by letting her see his point of view. That he did not think there was anything beyond the money question in her work, amused, whilst it made her feel small. So did Joe Wallingford, himself, his slow, deliberate speech, and entire simplicity of self-betrayal. He spoke no language but his own, and that indifferently well. He told her he had left school when he was thirteen, and he seemed to think he had learned quite enough.

He knew nothing of John Hepplewight-Ventom, and was quite unimpressed when, in answer to a question, Vanessa described him as *the* great stylist of the Victorian Era. But he was interested when Vanessa mentioned that she had a grown-up son, and, for the first time, she found herself saying

Sebastian had chosen a mercantile career, without being ashamed, or distressed.

There was no apparent reason Joe Wallingford should have been more congenial to her than David Rendall, neither of them possessed the external qualities that she deemed so essential. But, without any apparent reason, she was indefinably attracted by the millionaire newspaper proprietor, and for the first time in all these intolerable weeks she talked of Sebastian, and the dinner hour proved all too short.

Joe Wallingford had spent over thirty, of his forty odd, years, in making money. Incidentally he had met provincial women of the prosperous middle classes, and a variety of those in a different strata altogether, poor daughters of pleasure. Lately he had met Hilda de Cliffe, after having a deal or two in horses with her husband, and been introduced by him to a private club in London, where they illegally played baccarat far into the small hours.

Hughie de Cliffe, Tony Hawthorn, and all that clique of racing men, thought they had got hold of rather a good thing in Joe. But then it was like their half-sharpness not to realise how little of a flat he was. He liked the experience they gave him. He was willing to pay something for it, although of course he would pay as little as he could. But he had no illusions about them at all, and he could have given them points, and a beating, in knowledge of a horse. In his part of the world, the very gutter children talk horse-flesh, and spot winners, betting their halfpennies on the stables they fancy.

This was the second, or third time, Joe had been to Seaton House. He played poker, and auction bridge, and baccarat, there. Tony Hawthorn was training some horses, and Joe had registered his colours on

the turf. Hilda had been very charming to Joe Wallingford, very charming indeed, but she had made no progress. He came for the horses, not for Hilda. It was true he was, at first, at the very first, impressed with rank and title. He was only now beginning to realise the purchasing power of his money. But his strong common sense saved him from over-rating anything that was, so to speak, for sale, and Lord and Lady de Cliffe, Seaton House, and the rest of it, had already quickly assumed their proper place in his estimation.

He had come down to-night because the great sale of yearlings was to-morrow, and Tony had written him that he should make a certain purchase. Then he met Vanessa Rendall, and to both of them it proved a momentous meeting.

After dinner, in the drawing-room, Hilda chaffed Vanessa a little about her conquest. Vanessa had always accepted the slight vulgarity, it was impossible to disregard, about Lady de Cliffe. She was the daughter of the Earl of Wargrave, and had not a drop of blood in her veins that was not as blue as Burke could prove it; but the vulgarity was unmistakably there also. It jarred upon Vanessa to-night, perhaps because her nerves were out of order, but possibly because she recognised that there was a substratum of truth in the implication she had been absorbed by her companion at dinner, and she disliked the complexion her friend was putting upon it.

"I found him interesting. He neither poses nor boasts; he seems quite unaware he is remarkable."

"Is he remarkable?"

Hilda yawned indifferently, she had curled herself up on the sofa, and her spasmodic vivacity died suddenly away. "I am glad you like him. I found him impossible, but I always knew you would fall in love some day, and with some one ludicrously inappropriate. You have as much

jewellery as you can carry," she added, irrelevantly. "I don't know what you'll do with him."

"What has altered your mood?" Vanessa asked, quietly. "You were not like this before dinner.

"No! before dinner," Hilda sighed, "I was so happy. I was happier, I think, than I had ever been in my life before. Now—now," she was quite tragic, "I am wretched, *tourmentée*, miserable!" She sat up suddenly. "Look at me, Vanessa, look at me. Am I ugly, old, dull?" and vehemently she answered herself. "I am not, I know I am not. My nose *is* too small, I have always admitted that, and some men like tall women best; but I looked lovely to-night when I came down, you know I did. This green satin suits me, it is the colour of the second circle in my eyes. The middle is black, and there is a line of dark outside. Every one has told me about that, and about my beautiful hair. And, to-night—to-night of all nights, I have grown pale, I look washed out! I was so good, too, I told Hugh what he must talk to you about, and that he must make himself agreeable, because you were the only woman I had ever known that I really and truly liked. I said he wasn't to tell you anecdotes from the *Winning Post*. . . ."

"But what has happened, what has upset you?" Vanessa knew Hilda as a woman of moods, with something in her of the poet, and something of the child. Vanessa's imagination invested Hilda de Cliffe with a thousand qualities that were foreign to her, and missed the essential one that set her apart.

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"How dull you are."

Vanessa smiled, she knew she was not dull. "Can't you see that I've fallen madly in love, that I shall die if I don't get him? Didn't you see that I've no eyes nor ears for anything else? And he

doesn't care for me, you know he doesn't. They will play bridge after dinner, they won't come up for hours."

Many weeks later when Stella, speaking of Lady de Cliffe, said she was a disease, and not a woman at all, Vanessa recalled this outpouring, about which there was no reticence, and little modesty. Hilda had fallen in love with Sir George Chitterling. She wanted Vanessa to talk to Hugh, to talk to every one, she said she wanted the coast left clear for her! She had begun the conversation by chaffing Vanessa about Joe Wallingford, she ended up by a reckless betrayal of the lowest moral standard; and an abandonment, scarcely sane, to an emotion that had seized her some three days since.

Vanessa was repelled, amazed, incredulous. Then she became analytic, and played the psychological novelist. And Hilda liked to have her feelings dissected, and to help in the dissection. Vanessa, who prided herself on being broad-minded, tried to hide her repulsion. Hilda was hysterically confidential, and unashamed.

When the men came up, the party fell easily into their places. Sir George Chitterling sat on the sofa, and mumured in a low voice to his hostess; who began to revive, and become animated, under the stimulus. Joe Wallingford sought Vanessa, and the others sat down to *ecarté*.

Vanessa, anxious to leave her hostess, and the card players, undisturbed, talked freely; and Joe listened, sympathetically. He was amazingly shrewd. She thought she had said little about Sebastian, or her disappointment in him, yet that was Joe's text. In their corner of the big drawing-room they were as isolated as if it had been a *tête-à-tête* they were enjoying.

"I should think he will do very well in business," Joe told her. He had, somehow or other, quickly

found out the subject that interested her. "I've had a lot of young fellows from public schools, and licked them into shape. It is not the public schools that do the harm, it's the loafing at the University for three years, afterwards. They are not much good after that," he said.

"I was disappointed," she admitted.

"At his going into the City? What did you want him to do?"

She hesitated.

"Almost anything."

"But you had something in view for him?"

"No, not definitely. The bar, literature, or politics, perhaps, if he had not preferred diplomacy."

"Ten years idling, and a crowd in front of him difficult to get past, hustling him out. As for politics, a successful business man has the best chance there. Why I——"

He paused, she could not want to hear what had happened to him. But she did, and pressed for it.

"I have been asked to stand for my division; it's not worth talking about. Tell me more about your son. It is his father's business, the hand-made paper, isn't it, the Rendall Mills?"

"Yes! They were trying material for my father's book when I first met Mr. Rendall.

"Were you helping him to write it?"

"Oh, no. How could I help him? Except perhaps by a little research work, and arranging his notes."

From the beginning, Joe found no difficulty in talking to Vanessa Rendall, such as had barred his speech in other drawing-rooms. He told her, presently, all about his own political chances, they were not aspirations, they were opportunities that were being pressed upon him. She was genuinely interested, and he found her most encouraging. The party, there was only one party in Vanessa's

eyes, and none at all, until lately, in Joe's, wanted Press influence, to spread their Protection tenets. London was safe, but there was doubt, hesitation, and appalling ignorance, in provincial trade centres. Joe Wallingford's seven or eight papers meant two or three million readers. And Joe was being bribed to make them read the truth about English merchandise, and the failure of Free Trade.

Not all at once, not only in that first evening, did Joe Wallingford unbosom himself to the first woman he had met in whom he found companionship, understanding, and something that he read for sympathy.

The Seaton House atmosphere was undoubtedly uncongenial to Vanessa. In London, Hilda had been an interesting novelty, a marionette, mouthing paradox and epigram ; humanly speaking, something of an abstraction. At close quarters she was weird, corrupt, unwholesome. Lady de Cliffe was everything of which Vanessa had no experience, and was unable to place. She was a morphia-maniac, to begin with. If she had ever had a moral fibre, it had become loose and coarse from the drug. She was given, in the intervals of super-intelligent analysis of her indulged emotions, to becoming quite uncontrollably enamoured, now of this, and now of the other, man.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate, that Vanessa should have timed her visit at the beginning of one of these erotic attacks. Hilda ate, slept, and dressed with only Sir George Chitterring in her mind. She talked of nothing else, she said inconceivable things that bewildered, and startled her guest.

Vanessa's visit was timed for a week, and she could not, without discourtesy, of which she was incapable, cut it short. But she could, and did, make it obvious to Joe Wallingford that she was out of her element, and thoroughly ill at ease. And

Joe, who had a hundred calls on his time, engagements and business of every description, to which he should have been attending, dismissed them all easily by letter, telegrams, and telephone, and, with the exception of two hurried visits to London, remained at her disposal.

It was an easy-going, hospitable house, and Joe knew how to make himself welcome to his host. He rode out on the heath in the mornings and saw the "young 'uns" gallop. He bought a horse from Hugh, and two yearlings at Tony's instigation. After the ladies had retired for the night, he played bridge, or poker, or anything that they suggested. One evening he took de Cliffe on at billiards. But there was no profit for Hughie in that! It is probable there would have been little, or none, in the other games if Joe had so minded. The position to which Joe Wallingford had attained is not won by a fool, or a flat. The big provincial was neither, but this week at Newmarket was worth paying for, so, although he was not fond of wasting his well-earned money, he paid for it.

He grew, in that week, into a very strange intimacy with a woman who had a hundred acquaintances, and only her sister and her son for friends. There was Stella, and there had been Sebastian. These, and her pen had sufficed Vanessa. She had taken her politics from the newspapers, and the world from books. Her acquaintances, other than the St. Maurs, were literary people, old friends of her father's; men and women to whom pictures, or Cloisonné, Chippendale furniture, eighteenth century mezzotints, china and miniatures, were more vital than humanity.

Joe Wallingford did not know an oleograph from an oil-painting, nor Battersea enamel from Lowestoft china, but she did not weary of his conversation. Joe was on the eve of great things, on the threshold

of a career that might lead to power. Lord Lenham wished to come on the board of the Imperial Syndicate. It had been suggested by him that the proprietor of the *Workington Chronicle* would find the party grateful for a correct interpretation of their views, and that the gratitude that commenced with a baronetcy might easily expand to a peerage.

Joe was being tempted to partizanship, and many lures were being spread before him. The boy, who had stood beside his father in shirt sleeves at the printing press, who had been taken away from school at thirteen years of age because the few shillings he could earn were of importance to the family exchequer, had found himself an honoured guest at the Earl of Tatterton's. He told Vanessa that Lord Tatterton was very genial to him, and Lenham, the eldest son and heir, who had been in the last Cabinet, and was active now in Opposition, hardly talked to any one else whilst Joe Wallingford had been the guest of the moment at Wroxford.

All this Vanessa heard. Joe did not stop to explain to himself his feeling for Vanessa, why he stayed on at Seaton House, why he, who had all his life been reticent, became communicative, why he, who had been attracted by no lure spread before him, found them all alluring when he was telling her of what might accrue. He had looked for none of the things that were being dangled before him. His ambitions had been to " sell a few more papers," for so he worded his business instinct for rivalling his competitors in his own trade. He had had, and this was Vanessa's phrasing, little interest in his own personality. And his sense of citizenship had been confined to local affairs. But Free Trade or Protection was a national matter. So was the growing political power of labour, woman's suffrage, and socialism.

Vanessa had always, it now appeared, been semi-

conscious of the nearness of these things to herself. She had always resented the limitations of her immediate interests, blaming Stella's health, her duty to David, the absorption of Sebastian, for her practical ineptitude. She grew momentarily absorbed in the man through whom she saw them close to her—just at the juncture when life was so amazingly empty. His perfunctory, slighting allusions to Imperial matters awoke in her an almost passionate desire to bring his responsibilities home to him. The ambitions, Sebastian had so thwarted, knew a strange, hot, recrudescence after these talks with Joe Wallingford. She knew how she could have helped, and quickened him, had he been son or brother. And she did quicken him by her eager intelligence, and insistence that he must go where he was being impelled, that he was the man for the hour.

For she had the mind to see, long before the world saw, that Joe Wallingford was a force, a strong man who had as yet shouldered no burden. The Conservatives were waiting for a leader, vainly surveying the political horizon for something, some one, to stem the rising tide of democracy and Fabianism. They were looking in recognised quarters, to great houses, for worthy scions. But as before, in times of stress, it was from the people the leader would arise.

Vanessa's enthusiasm led Joe Wallingford to accept the offer that had been made to him to stand for the southern division of Workington, but it had a far stranger effect than that.

"You are not very happy here. Why are you staying on?" Joe asked her, bluntly, one afternoon, when Sir George and Hilda occupied the drawing room, the men monopolised the hall, and the dull library, with its stale smoke, and air of disuse, was the only refuge from her bedroom. She flushed, she was so completely honest.

"I do not want to go home."

"Why?"

He was blunt, and she was honest. It was because she had said she would not go back, because Sebastian had disappointed her by going into business! How poor, and trivial, and absurd, it suddenly seemed. Her heart ached with longing for him; grew sick with longing for him, when even his spoken name was in the room. This week had solaced it, she knew in a flash of intuition, gone almost as quickly as it came, how she had been solaced. Joe Wallingford was a successful business man. And her Sebastian was second to none in talent or industry.

"They will be looking for you," he said, shrewdly, "a boy knows his mother won't stop away from him for long because he has chosen his career for himself."

Joe did not speak of David, he did not want to remember she had a husband. But her son was part of her, no intimacy with, or knowledge of, Vanessa could ignore it. Estranged from him as she imagined herself, his name was daily, hourly, on her lips.

"You don't look as if you had a boy of eighteen," he went on. They very seldom touched intimate personal things. But the uttermost limit of his visit had been reached. He was going to leave her behind him, and take up the life of which they had talked. Meetings and men loomed before him, indefinably lacking in interest. "You must have married very young."

"I was barely eighteen."

"That means you are about thirty-eight."

It was involuntary; it came to his mind he was forty-three. He was the right age for her, and she was the only woman he had ever seen that he could have married. Not a man of sentiment, knowing little of women, and not given to thinking of his

personal needs, it had not struck him until now that he was alone in the world.

They had been out together, and she was more feminine than usual in her motor hat and flowing veil. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes softly bright. In the glow of the firelight, she stood, warm, companionable, and desirable.

Her upright figure was slim as a girl's, the dark tailor-made coat defined its lines.

"You ought to be at home," he went on, slowly.

"Because?"

"Because it's your place. And they'll be wanting you, they'll both be wanting you all the time."

"I have nothing in common with them," she repeated, anxious to be contradicted, wanting to be persuaded. "I am primarily, and above all things, a literary woman. Books absorb me, the printed page, my own, and other people's. You asked me once why I write? I cannot help writing. Since I can remember, I have translated feeling into phrase, that is my life's essence. I cannot explain it, nor," and she smiled, "excuse it, for to you it needs excuse. Even now——" she hesitated.

"Even now, you were going to say, when you are suffering from having separated yourself from the boy and your home, when you are restless, and conscious of the wrong surroundings, you think you can make a story of it, and so get right?"

She could not be uncandid.

"It has always been true, but now it is not quite true. I cannot write——" She flushed slightly. Why should she be talking so openly to this comparative stranger?

"You see him, he comes between the pen and the paper?"

"Yes! between me and my book, between me and my thoughts." And then she added, impulsively, "It is only when I am talking about him

that I get over it a little, that—that my heart does not ache." She put her hand involuntarily to her side. "The heartache stops then. Otherwise, all the time, day and night, at meals, when I try to write, in the midst of talking, all the time, I am conscious of nothing so acute as my longing for him, the emptiness of my days and dreams. . . ."

Her voice broke a little, and she was ashamed. There was more sympathy, more softness in his eyes, when she raised hers to meet them, than she had expected to see. She had never met any one so understanding, with whom she could talk so freely. She went on, a little breathlessly:

"It is possible I am exaggerating. Perhaps, talking to you like this, is another form of literary self-indulgence, insincerity?"

"No, it isn't, you mean every word you say, and feel it. You don't know yourself, that's all. There is a woman in you, you've clouded her with ink, but she's there all the same. I wish——"

But she did not hear what he wished, for he dismissed it with an impatient sigh, and went on:

"You are out of place here, out of your element. This woman, Lady Hilda, is not your sort. You go home. Home is the place for a woman like you, it don't much matter what you do there. Scribble, or leave it alone, but go back to the boy. You're loose from your moorings without him. When a boat's loose from its moorings, it drifts——"

He stopped; and she said, lightly:

"I should not drift very far."

"There are many might like to tow you to port," he rejoined, rather irritably. She looked up in surprise, and some amusement.

"Don't you be offended with me. You know I'm plain spoken. You're too good-looking to go about by yourself."

"Absurd!" she answered quickly, reddening a little, nevertheless.

"Too attractive."

"But I am not at all that sort of woman," she interpolated, interested, all the same, in a new view of herself.

"No! and I have never been at all that sort of man, nevertheless. . . ." Their eyes met.

"Absurd," she said again, averting hers.

"I knew it would seem like that to you," he answered, quietly, one might have thought, indifferently. "You don't care whether I'm dead or alive, I'm naught to you, your whole mind is on the boy. But it wouldn't be absurd if you did what you talk of doing, freed yourself from your ties, lived alone."

"I can take care of myself."

"Every woman can take care of herself until she likes the man who likes her."

So desirable she looked, in her surprise, and growing interest, the firelight red on her ebon hair, and warm about her warmth, that he said, harshly:

"Go home. You are not safe out of your home."

It struck her, quite suddenly, that he was telling her something of what she had never known, of some power or possibility in herself of which she had never dreamed. She had had no love, or lovers, in her life. She wanted to dwell on the literary value of the situation. But, instead, the personality of the man held her, and his next words arrested her.

"Are you going home?" he asked, brutally. "Because, if not, there is Workington."

"You mean?"

"I mean——"

He changed his intention in the middle of his speech. He was cool and level-headed, habitually, and there had been only a momentary lapse from his habit.

"That if you are not going back to your home, you had better come to Workington. You can write at your novel, or you can come in with us in this campaign. There will be articles, manifestos, speeches."

He had visions, a quick thought of companionship in twilight hours, a room warm, like this one, with firelight, and she there, always, to meet him after the day's work.

"Will you come?" he asked her, quite plainly.

And for a moment she stood silent, contemplating a new prospect. He had a great future in front of him, and she could help him. *He* would not thwart her, nor break from her influence. His massive strength made some appeal to her, the strangeness of her sensations held, or compelled, her interest.

A subtle something, fear or feeling, thrilled her. She looked up to meet inquiring eyes; he was uncertain still, he had known her but a short week. Now she hesitated, when he expected quick rejection.

"Is it to be Workington?"

"Wait! Wait! I am trying to think what your offer means." But she was unconsciously embarrassed when she said the words, that, almost involuntarily, brought him nearer to her. She went on, hurriedly, getting, as she thought, on to safe ground, "you mean that if I am genuine, serious; if I really intend disassociating myself permanently from husband and son, you"—her speech grew slow, hesitating, it was absurd to feel embarrassed, but the absurdity came to pass—"you would offer me a political career, polemics to write, the Anti-Suffrage Movement to direct in your publications?"

He interrupted her, quite unceremoniously:

"I am offering you whatever you want. Work, or——"

He was standing directly in front of her now,

and again they looked into each other's eyes. His was a very steady look, and it was Vanessa's eyes that fell. She drew in her breath suddenly, and again she said.

"Wait!"

"You may as well be frank with me," he answered, after a short pause. "Speak what is in your mind; you must know what is in mine. I am in no hurry, take your own time. If you are in earnest that you have severed yourself from home, come to Workington. Leave it at that; you can do as you like when you get there——I'd like to see you often."

She shaded her eyes with her hands, she was indeed out of her element. She felt as stupid as a school girl, and as shy. Of course she was misunderstanding him, and there was no meaning in his eyes, such as had lowered hers. Out of the confusion of her thoughts, after a few difficult moments, sprang sincerity of speech.

"I have been trying to do the impossible. How stupid I have been! How blind! Sebastian is—*is* me," she said, slowly. "I have been contemplating life without him, and there has become a hollow where was my heart. I feel faint, physically faint. It could not be, it is impossible. I have mistaken myself, my strength. You have shown me my way, I have been so horribly wrong."

Silence fell again. She uncovered her eyes, looking into the fire, ignoring that which she did not wish to understand.

"I have been horribly wrong, and unreasonable. At this moment, I don't know why, I suddenly see it all quite clearly. It has been only temper, my bad temper, that I have been indulging, because I could not get my own way! One name or another, the trade of literature, or the trade of paper making; what does it really matter? Through your clear eyes one is no finer than the other. How

you belittle the things I revere—unconsciously, of course. The dead past is all dead to you, and there is only the present, and a short future, for us to play in. You have bought my books, but you have never read them. You have heard my father's name, but it has no meaning for you. And yet you, how strange, have made everything so clear to me. How little I count——"

"No. No."

"How little my work matters, my motherhood counts more——"

"Call it your womanhood."

She was really thinking aloud. She said, quite slowly:

"I have never been sure about that. Stella, my sister, has queried it, and Lady de Cliffe, I myself, too, sometimes!"

"It's there, right enough," said Joe.

"Perhaps I should never have written novels, divided myself from the living?" she asked him, hesitatingly.

"You've had no call to do it."

"It has always seemed to me that I have had no genuine call to do anything else, that that alone is inherent, uncontrollable. I think so much more clearly, and easily, with a pen in my hand."

"Well, it has come to this. It is the first time you are in trouble, and your pen has not helped you. You've got a heart——"

"Small, narrow——"

"Give it a chance."

"Go back?"

"Or go forward. There's Workington, and—and the movement." He had almost added, instead, "and me."

"You want to test me?"

"Don't you make a mistake. I want to put things before you. You told me you'd left home

for good, you had done with your husband and your son. I've told you where, and how, you can get into a new groove. I'm not disinterested——"

"You think I could be of use to you?" She wanted to be assured that she was on safe ground, that nothing had occurred to startle her.

He had no subtlety.

"I don't think anything of the sort," he answered, plainly. "I think I could have been of use to you."

"You!" And her face flushed.

"Well!" he said. "Well, it seems you don't get on well with your husband. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

It was not coincidence, but the parlourmaid, that brought Sebastian's irregular scrawl on the silver salver.

"An express letter, Madam."

She took it with a quick beat of the heart, and a thrill of apprehension, or pleasure. He had written, it had come at last, the call of her boy; nothing was vital but that, he had written to her, at last!

"Dear Mater,"—the words struck coldly to her: in his letters he had used always the childish pet name. He had always before written "Mumsy," but now she had estranged him. Her eyes ravished the page:

"Uncle John has had an accident, and it has knocked the pater out of time. I thought you ought to know. Sebastian."

With pale lips she turned to Joe:

"Bad news?" he asked, briefly, reading her face.

"I must get home, quickly, at once. How right you were!"

He did not stay to argue, or tell her it was not he who had said it. He set himself to help her.

"We'll have the motor round again. Your maid can follow with the things; I'll take you up. You shall tell me all about it as we go along."

He was a man upon whom to lean. Vanessa had prided herself on needing no strength but her own;

but, from the first, she found Joe Wallingford reliable. It seemed no time at all from the moment the servant brought her the letter on the salver, to when she found herself back again in the familiar Harley Street drawing-room, listening to what had occurred in her absence.

Joe Wallingford was with her, and that made it different somehow. He had brought her up in the motor, and she had let him come upstairs. She heard that no one was at home. "Mr. Sebastian is at the office, the master is with Mr. John; and so is Mr. William." It seemed that Mr. John had been knocked down by a motor-omnibus yesterday evening, they thought he would not live through the night, but Mr. Sebastian said this morning he was still alive. The master had been with him all the time.

Vanessa pressed eager questions as to how Mr. Sebastian was looking; the man could only say he seemed very distressed about his father.

Joe Wallingford, listening, was taking in his surroundings. The beautiful, over-full, drawing-room reflected the personality of the woman with whom he had fallen in love. There was no good disguising from himself what had happened; he made no attempt to do so. All the fine china, and prints, and miniatures, were toys, and she a child, who played with them. But the note in her voice when she spoke of the boy was a woman's note. It convinced him that here indeed was her heart; and it seemed to him, in a dull moment of disappointment, that she had given all of it.

"I am sorry Sebastian is not at home yet; he may come in any minute. I expect he has gone on to Clapham," she said to Joe.

"Mr. John is not at Clapham, ma'am," the man interrupted. "He is close round here, at Dr. Gifford's; they took him to the hospital, but Dr.

Gifford had him fetched away. Mr. Sebastian is coming home; he ordered cold supper, so as he could be in when convenient. He said he would fetch the master along with him, if he could."

Vanessa hesitated. Should she go to Dr. Gifford's? Should she wait? The boy was unused to trouble, and she knew not what might be happening. David was wrapped up in his brothers.

"You will be wanting to get your things off. I'll go in the motor, if you give me the address, and bring you back the latest news, or your son——"

She was quickly grateful; but Sebastian fore stalled him. He was in the room, the knowledge of his presence was in her glad, satisfied eyes!

Joe's heart felt cold and heavy. How near he had been to making a fool of himself; to believing that this woman had ever seriously thought to cut herself adrift from home, that he could have stood to her for anything but an outsider. . . .

There was no sentiment in the greeting between mother and son, and yet it told him all this.

"That you, mater?"

"I came as quickly as possible. I only got your letter an hour and a half ago."

"You've come too late," he said, "it's all over."

Then he threw himself on the sofa, and she went over to him, knelt by him, put her head down beside his, said a word or two in his ear—broken words. She was so sorry. Neither of them noticed Joe Wallingford. He was no part of them, an unconsidered stranger. He went softly away, rather sore.

She had never had tender words for any man. She could not find them even for Sebastian; but she knelt beside him.

"Don't cry; I can't bear it," she said in a low voice, "it is not like you."

He soon exhausted his emotion. Outwardly everything between them was as it had always been. It was she to whom he could always talk.

"It has been awful, too awful! Thank God you've come. Uncle William is off his head. He just sits and moans, and rocks himself and gets out: 'I'm the eldest. It ought to have been me; it isn't fair, it ought to have been me.' The governor tries to comfort him. He says: 'Pull yourself together, Bill, pull yourself together.' He repeats it over and over again. And then he lies on John's bed, and cries."

Sebastian's voice broke.

"Uncle John only spoke about once. He said: 'It's all right, Will, it's all right, Dave; we've got the boy you won't miss me.'"

"Can anything be done?"

Sebastian gradually regained his composure. He had an awed sense of responsibility; he knew there was a great deal to do. Uncle William was off his head, and his father was dazed with grief. He would not have broken down in this way, but for finding his mother waiting for him, but for her familiar eyes and speech, and the knowledge that nothing need be said, that all was right between them once more.

"He died half an hour ago. The governor is still sitting by him, all stunned and quiet. But they can't quiet Uncle Will; he goes on talking to him—" he broke off again. "It's awful! I've got to go out to Clapham, and tell them there. The pater will be in presently, you'll look after him."

"But you must have something to eat first."

She took practical command at once. He was glad to be taken care of, made to eat, to drink a pint of champagne, to tell what he knew, to talk. He was so young.

He said: "Aren't you glad now that I'm in the

business? I suppose it's some sort of Providence made me obstinate about it. I can take something off the pater's shoulders."

But all of her heart was with him in the immediate present, and she was feeling acutely her past disloyalty.

"I will go out to Clapham instead of you. You have been with your father all through, and it will be no fresh excitement for him to see you when he comes back."

"I expect he would rather have you."

Before, however, they had got through with supper or plans, Dr. Gifford arrived in Harley Street, bringing David with him. David was very grey and quiet. He did not seem surprised at seeing Vanessa there.

"Sebastian has wanted you," he said dully.

Vanessa made him sit down; she pressed food and drink upon him; she tried, wordlessly, to comfort him. Dr. Gifford soon left the three together. He was taking William home later, he thought the old housekeeper, and the people to whom he was accustomed, would be best able to meet his needs.

Vanessa went out in the hall with the doctor, and was told the truth. William Rendall had had a shock from which he might not recover. He was over sixty, and had been failing somewhat, lately, in many ways.

"Put your husband to bed; keep him there, warm, lightly fed, as quiet as possible. He has taken it better than I could have expected, and will probably be all right, if we get through the next few hours. Sebastian can make the arrangements for the funeral. Tell him to come round in the morning, about ten. I'll have the certificate ready."

"He is so young."

"He is quite able to do all that is necessary.

And at the office—it's a good thing he is there. It is the only chance of keeping Rendall in bed."

Vanessa went back to the dining-room. Both husband and son were very silent, awaiting her. Sebastian, with the recuperative power of youth, was almost cheerful. And exhausted as he was, and desperately miserable, David wanted Vanessa to know they were glad of her presence. He exerted himself to eat a little, to drink what was urged upon him. It seemed natural presently that they should both of them be going upstairs with him, mother and son conveyed a message to each other, simultaneously. David must have Sebastian's room, the one that opened into Vanessa's; he would want company that night, comfort, the sound of a human voice. They would not heed his protests. And he was almost too broken to urge that they must not mind him.

After he had been got to bed, Vanessa sat talking in her own room to Sebastian, far into the night. They said little of what had divided them. The intimacy between them was still there, but, perhaps, it was a different intimacy. There was remorse, and a new tenderness in Vanessa. Before this, Sebastian had only loved and admired his mother; now he judged her. It was for his father, and not for himself only, he had been resentful. He could not forget it all at once, yet he was himself unconscious of the change. If he never again accepted her quite so unreservedly, on the surface, all was as before. She needed the assurance of his love; the knowledge he had missed her was bitter-sweet and poignant. There was no long-winded explanation. She did not try to palliate her conduct. All he told her was:

"I was sorry you took it that way, my going into business. I had to do it. We have always talked things out before, and it made everything rotten."

"I was wrong, I was mistaken, unreasonable, illogical:" her heart cried how wrong she had been. She was generous and passionate in her admission of it, there was no hesitation or reserve.

"The pater had the hump over you."

"I was fearfully depressed the whole time, homesick for you. Don't reproach me more than you can help!"

"Of course I know it was only because you thought such a lot of me."

"I do still." They smiled at each other. Things were very nearly as they had always been between them, the sense of companionship, and comprehension was still there.

"I daresay you are right. Uncle John said he'd never seen any one take to the accountancy like I did: figuring is awfully easy to me. Mater, isn't it funny when you think it was classics brought me up in everything at Eton; and now it's only my mathematics that are any good. And the mill too; there's simply nothing left for me to learn in the way of making hand-made paper."

"Then you like it?"

"Well! I wouldn't go as far as that." He sat silent for a minute. But he was used to letting her see into his thoughts.

"I suppose I am a bit of a snob. I hate selling the stuff. I went round to Wroughton's with the governor; they are going to have a new magazine, archæological, and they are doing it top-up. Well, it happens Wroughton minor was at my tutor's. He was still in remove when I was in first hundred—" Sebastian paused, and then went on, with a short laugh:

"The little beast patronised me. 'I'll give you a leg up with the governor,' he said, whilst the pater was talking; 'there are three of you in it for quality and price, but you'll get the order, you see.'"

"Irritating!"

"Sickening, wasn't it? I wanted to tell him to go to the devil. But when we came out of the office the pater said I seemed quite friendly with young John Wroughton, and that he thought it would be of use!"

"I don't know how you bear it all."

"The governor has been ever so much better, in a lot of ways. Dr. Gifford says he is pounds stronger."

"There was never such a son."

"That's rot!" But he was quite pleased with himself, nevertheless, and ready to sit up any length of time, hearing Vanessa expatiate upon the theme.

David rallied from the shock of his brother's death, but William Rendall never rallied, passing, by slow stages, from feeble misery to happier vacuity, and second childhood.

David and Sebastian were all that were left to maintain the prestige, and the status, of P. and A. Rendall and Co. It was pitiful during the next few months to note David's efforts to guard the boy from overwork, from over-anxiety, to make things easy for him, to take burden after burden from the young shoulders, to press upon his own. And always he belittled his efforts:

"You have no idea how that boy works," he told Vanessa, often. "You should make him take a day off now and again. Can't you think of some way of persuading him away from the city?"

"I have never been able to persuade you away from it," she would answer, drily. But indeed with her new, softer, vision she had heartache over both of them, her first consciousness of a heart was the pain she felt there. Sebastian was a man before he had grown out of boyhood. That man and boy warred in him, to the advantage of neither, she saw dimly.

The year that John Rendall died, and William Rendall began to die, Vanessa Rendall relinquished her pen. Sebastian taught her, or perhaps in some indefinable way, Joe Wallingford had taught her, how little of value she was abandoning. This was the year that she began to grow toward womanhood, opening her heart, widening her sympathies. Her pen lay idle, but her eyes began to see.

Not very clearly at first, nor very quickly. They had been blind eyes so long, focused to MSS., lost to a larger perspective.

If puppets, and prints, and china, were to be displaced, what was she to put in their stead ? Always there had been Sebastian and Stella, and the uneasy knowledge of David's worth : none of this was new. Was Joe Wallingford to supply the answer ?

He was constantly in Harley Street, coming up from Workington on Saturday, and staying in London over the week end, becoming an *habitué* of her house, taking in Sebastian and David with his quick intelligence, helpful to them all in a way, and impressing his personality.

Stella, temporarily restored to her normal indifferent health, became cognisant of the newcomer, and his influence. She jeered at it gently, but not without a little jealousy. She could not bear that any one should have a serious place in her sister's interest. Sebastian was the only rival she tolerated, and that not without reservations.

Stella was a little irritable with her sister these days : the source of it lay deep.

" You still think Sebastian is a genius, I suppose," she said to Vanessa, " although he is selling paper in the City, and adopting a City attitude toward life ? "

Vanessa had to admit that her opinion of Sebastian's talents had not altered, and almost humbly she added that her opinion of his character was

higher than it had ever been. She realised now how finely and quickly he had seen his duty to his father, how loyally he was performing it; she saw her own inferiority to him both in perception and action.

And this canonisation of Sebastian at the mother's expense, was a little exasperating to Stella, who loved her sister and only tolerated her nephew. She said little jeering things about him on every occasion. Vanessa, always conscious of Stella's loneliness in life, of her unhappy marriage, restrained her replies, made every possible allowance for a temper embittered by circumstance. But she was conscious of a growing estrangement, conscious that now she oftener sought her sister's companionship from a sense of duty, than of pleasure.

CHAPTER XIII

SEBASTIAN took little advantage of his father's solicitude. He worked his eight or ten hours a day in the City, or at the mills, conscientiously learning the intricacies of the paper trade, and incidentally of the weakness in the methods of Messrs. P. and A. Rendall, a weakness he saw a hundred easy ways of remedying!

But he was not yet twenty, and play, of a sort, was as essential to his growth as work. Pleasey Pleyden-Carr, and his cousin Bice, each took their separate place. With the first, his intimacy grew. His idealism gilded the pale hair, made queenly and beautiful the slight figure, rare and delicate the reserve that found their friendship always at the same level. That secret sentimentality, that never wholly left him, made the girl's poverty and dependence part of her charm, lighting and keeping warm his chivalry, deepening his feeling for her. And Bice was ever his confidante, although they talked in ellipsis, finding together illuminative love passages from Browning and Shakespeare, letting it be understood, almost without words between them, how it was with him.

And the St. Maurs added zest to the lives of the young people. They were always getting up entertainments, giving dinner-parties, theatre parties, impromptu dances. Mrs. St. Maur had now got it well into her frizzled head, and established behind her beaming glasses, that the Rendalls and the

Ashtons "*mattered*," that they were really amongst the most distinguished of her acquaintances! She had even little obvious schemes, and intrigues, about Bice and Reggie, about Sebastian and the fat Viola. If the young St Maurs knew what was in store for them, Sebastian and Bice were ignorant. They lived on a higher plane of feeling than the others, love itself was a sacrament, marriage dazzling, inchoate, dim in the distance, a little beyond their young vision.

Bice would willingly, cheerfully, at any time have given her life for her cousin. All that he took from her, however, was her tireless sympathy for his love of Pleasey Pleyden-Carr.

It was, nevertheless, in pursuance of the matrimonial schemes, doomed to prove abortive, that the St. Maurs decided to devote their autumn to private theatricals. This was Sebastian's second year in business. He was twenty years of age, and there was a little down on his upper lip, dark and becoming. Viola's frocks were hurriedly lengthened, and the theatricals suddenly decided upon.

Naturally, with a Sebastian and Viola in the caste, *Twelfth Night* was selected. The incongruity of the fat and auburn-haired Viola with her suppositious twin, was of no moment to Mrs. St. Maur.

"They can both be dressed alike, and Mr. Clarkson will see about the wigs," she said, comfortably, when it was brought before her, overriding all difficulties, talking volubly, quoting the absurd dicta of insignificant people, beginning already to get out a list of guests who might attend the performance.

But it was Bice who did all the real work, organising everything admirably, arranging rehearsals. settling costumes, casting the parts among her college friends and their brothers. Mrs. St. Maur

wanted Reggie to play Orsino, and at first he agreed with her, could not see himself as anything but the love-sick Duke of Illyria! It was Bice who reminded him, and that without offence, of his height, and of his glasses; who finally persuaded him to Sir Andrew, where, incidentally it may be noted, he achieved a well-merited success. It was she, too, who preserved Olivia for Pleasey, fighting for her, with almost incredible obstinacy, as she would never have fought for herself. And thus securing Sebastian his great opportunity.

The rehearsals brought the families together as they could never otherwise have been brought. Mrs. St. Maur was one continual beam of *mala-propos* delight. She called everybody by their wrong name, and displayed a most *naive* and, to the young people, other than her own, delightful, ignorance of the play, the characters, and the appropriate scenery. Viola, for instance, had a pretty little voice; Mrs. St. Maur reported that her music-master said it was just like Patti's, but more refined! It was Bice, no one but she could have done it, who put Viola into motley, cast her for the part of the clown, promising her bewildered mother that she would bring down the house in that comic barcarolle, "Come away, death."

Sebastian was urgent that Viola should wear page's costume, and exhibit her legs. Mrs. St. Maur was quite flattered, almost looking upon it as a proposal, when he said that she would look like one of his mother's colour-prints, like the Morland, that hung on the staircase. It was only Bice who knew that it was the "Girl with Calves" to which he was alluding, and who enjoyed his ribald merriment!

Everybody had incredible fun out of Mrs. St. Maur; there was hardly anything they could not make her believe that Shakespeare had written, in his directions to the players. Bice and Sebastian

Stella was in the lower box, level with the stalls. Behind her was Lord Saighton. Lord Saighton was her contribution to the show. Both of them were entertained by the St. Maurs; afterwards, when the curtain had risen, in considering Vanessa.

"Do you think she really does believe that boy of hers to be Irving, and Tree, and George Alexander, rolled into one?" she asked him.

Lord Saighton had no doubt at all about it.

"Yes! I have been watching her, and it is quite obvious there is no one else on all the stage, no play, and no performers. Her eyes follow him, and when he is off the stage, all her interest goes. She sits back, she has forgotten the play, and the stage, she is thinking of something else. I see Rendall is with her to-night. I don't know when I have seen them out together before. He looks very ill. And who is the rough-hewn giant beside them? It can't be Wallingford, can it?"

"Yes, that is the Colossus of Workington. As for David Rendall, he is Vanessa's new *rôle*. Some one has told her he is going to die. Or else she has fallen in love, and her conscientiousness takes it that way. But love, I should imagine to be impossible to Vanessa."

She gave a quick sigh. Would it had been impossible to her too! Her companion looked at her:

"Are you unhappy?" he asked, gently.

"No! Quite happy," she answered, cynically, "how could I be otherwise, with you beside me, the cynosure of all eyes, and our positions so secure!"

"You are always haunted by the fear of Jack's return, and what he might say or do"

"Is there any other reason why you banished yourself from the house?" she answered.

But they had threshed it out a score of times, and nothing could be done or altered.

To-night was the first time it entered Vanessa's head that Lord Saighton was a very attractive man, and Stella still young, and perhaps susceptible. It is possible it was Joe who drew her attention to it. But if so, it was quite unconsciously:

"Isn't that Lord Saighton with your sister?" he asked. "The last place in the world I should have expected to find him! I suppose, one way and another, no public career has ever been quite as inexplicable as Saighton's. He had the ball at his feet, and he would not kick it. There must have been a reason."

"The public ascribed the usual one," she answered lightly.

"But it was scarcely sufficient."

Then it was that it struck her about Stella's possible susceptibility. And her conscience troubled her that she had been less affectionate, less attentive to Stella lately. She was her sister's natural defence against the world. She became, all at once, indefinitely uneasy, and her pleasure in the performance was damped. Whenever Sebastian was not on the stage, her thoughts wandered to Stella. Lord Saighton had been right in thinking her mind was only on the stage when the boy was there, but he was far from suspecting where it had wandered.

She must warn Stella against Lord Saighton, she must throw the bulwark of her constant companionship around the defencelessness of the deserted wife. Once more she doubted if she had ever been justified in writing novels.

These thoughts possessed her through Sebastian's enthusiastic reception and the excitement of the triumphant *finale*. For of course it appeared to her as a triumph. Surely his acting stood out among the others, his voice carried, and his love-making scene with Olivia had both grace and conviction! No one seemed to touch him in talent or conse-

quence, and it was his personality that dominated the stage.

The announcement, made by Mr. St. Maur, that the "Charity had benefited to the extent of one hundred and seventeen pounds, and that Mrs. St. Maur had added a subscription to make up the amount to one hundred and fifty pounds," was received with a burst of applause.

Then came calls for the actors, and Sebastian's appearance with Pleasey. Bice, too, had her meed of praise. Both mothers might be proud and satisfied.

There was to be a ball and supper at the Grafton Galleries; everybody hurried to get away, invitations had been liberally scattered. Lady de Cliffe intercepted Vanessa to give forth a sparkling witticism of two. Sir George was with her; she had accomplished all her desires, and was alight with flashes of miasmic brilliancy.

"Sir George is coming on with me to supper. Keep a table, we shall make a charming party. How quiet you have kept your affair with the Wallingford! Everybody says you are only trying to sell him your next book! Your discretion is an absolute byword. And your sister is here with Saighton, the St. Maurs as proud as if they had invented the *liaison*. I haven't seen Saighton since he made love to me in the schoolroom, and pretended it was paternal. Do get him!"

Vanessa tried to reach her sister, but the crowd divided them. She wanted to speak to Stella; the impression of discomfort, uneasiness had deepened. Joe seemed to realise it, instinctively, or perhaps a whisper had reached him.

"They are old friends," he said, following her thought. "Slander hurts no one but the slanderer."

"He was an intimate friend of her husband's," was the quick reply.

But all that evening, watching Sebastian dance, thinking no one danced so gracefully, receiving congratulations, talking, supping, it was in the background of Vanessa's mind that Stella was threatened by some danger, and was unhappy; that she had neglected her responsibilities, allowed herself to be momentarily estranged by a verbal flippancy that might be covering some new dilemma or distress.

David had gone home straight from the theatre. Late nights, dances, and suppers, were not for him. He had seen Sebastian act, and that was sufficient. Joe Wallingford was with Vanessa the greater part of the evening; she did not dance, but she was continually surrounded by friends whose voices warred with the band. Joe had little of her mind. As much of it as she could spare from Sebastian, was following Stella into the night. Stella's face came back to Vanessa amid gyrating figures, the music, the talk and laughter around her. It was an unhappy face, haunting. Some of Stella's prettiness was going. Vanessa had a quick pang when she recalled it; the revealing pink in the lids of the blue eyes had struck her to-night. She was full of self-reproach that she had resented sharp speech, or failed in kindness.

Poor Joe! He had always known he had set his heart on a woman who had not room for him, and to-night she made it clearer than ever. He could do nothing for her, and be nothing to her. And there was no other woman for him. If he underrated her literary importance, or her lineage, he was supremely conscious of her social grace.

Stella, like David, had gone straight home from the theatre. Vanessa was supposed to be chaperoning Bice, and, at least, she succeeded in keeping Lady de Cliffe from their table. Joe took them all home in the motor he had kept waiting. The boy talked incessantly of the events of the evening, of

Pleasey Pleyden-Carr's dancing, and her acting. Vanessa listened with only half an ear. But Bice was whole-hearted in praise of "Olivia." None of them paid much heed to Joe Wallingford, notwithstanding that he was Workington's great man, and already of some consequence in a larger sphere.

"Good-night, and thanks," Vanessa said to him at the door, holding out her hand. They had dropped Bice, he might have expected her attention now.

"It was awfully good of you to come up. I hope you were not bored," Sebastian added, politely.

But they had forgotten him before the street door shut them into their warm companionship, forgotten him before the sough of the motor had died in the street. He knew it, but he knew it without bitterness; not without envy, perhaps.

Vanessa was not quite in the mood for Sebastian. He wanted to talk about the "show," about the scenery, about the St. Maurs. It was with difficulty Vanessa persuaded him to bed.

"It is nearly three o'clock, and you have got to be up at eight. Go to bed now, there's a dear boy. We will talk of it to-morrow, You had a great success, a great triumph. And Bice too. There were no waits, the whole thing was admirably done, unlike any other amateur performance. We will talk it over to-morrow. I am tired now. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIV

IT was Stella haunted her night.

It was still early in the morning of the next day, hardly noon, when she was in Weymouth Street, seeking words, embarrassed, she hardly knew at what.

Always Stella was surrounded by flowers, to-day her room was full of violet and yellow orchids, rare and costly. She wore a tea-gown, made out of an embroidered *crepe de chîne* kimona, many coloured and quaint. She looked singularly attractive to Vanessa, and was for once in high spirits, and humour.

"Well! did I ever see such a Sebastian as Sebastian? No! I never did. And have I seen the press notices! Yes! I have, and I think they are wonderful, and he is wonderful, and you are more wonderful than either, to think they matter. Sit down, I haven't seen you for an age. It went off well, didn't it? Bice is delighted with Sebastian, and incidentally with herself. Anything the matter?" Stella could read her sister like a book; "you look worried, or anxious, has anything happened to the paragon? Did he drink too much champagne last night, or dance too often with Pleasey?"

"Look here, Stella."

"Where!"

"I want to speak to you."

"I thought perhaps you did not come round to remain entirely silent."

"About something—rather serious." She *was* embarrassed, even with Stella it seemed a liberty she was about to take. Stella was interested and curious.

"Go on, don't make too much fuss about it, whatever it is."

"I won't. You know you are rather an attractive woman . . ."

"Why only 'rather' attractive?"

"And Lord Saighton is, in many ways, a remarkable man."

"Oh! that's it, is it? Your text is Lord Saighton! Go on with the sermon. I am in the rare position of being able to answer its argument. You have not all the best of it, like the parson in his ungetatable pulpit."

Stella, suddenly grave, felt she must treat the matter lightly. How blind Vanessa had been all these years! Who, or what, had opened her eyes, and what had she seen?

"I am fascinating, and Lord Saighton is remarkable! Where is there a connection, or isn't there a connection? You remember, I suppose," she added, with a touch of bitterness under the lightness, "that Jack is not dead. He is only living with another woman, and honouring the Argentine Republic, until he has spent all they have taken with them that was mine."

"I know, I know."

She knew how desperately Stella had been treated, and how little she deserved it. "I don't talk about it, but I never really forget."

They were twins, and she never forgot in what different lines to her own, her sister's life had been cast.

"But although only by an hour, I am older than you. Perhaps, too, I have seen more of the world."

Stella laughed. She could not help it, Vanessa

thought herself the more worldly of the two, the more experienced, and practical, all because she wrote novels, and invented paradoxes. But Vanessa ignored the laugh, and went on earnestly.

"It seems a joke to you. But it is not really humorous. People judge from what they see on the surface; and it struck me last night that, in a way, he was being very attentive to you. And his being there at all——"

"He is on the council of the orphanage."

"Oh! I did not know that. But anyway——" she grew a little red, and went on:

"I know, I happen to know, that being married does not make so much difference to what a man thinks of a woman."

Stella wondered how Vanessa had acquired that strange piece of information, and she put her wonder into an exclamation.

"A man thinks a woman can be a companion to him. He grows to like talking to her," she explained, with some embarrassment, and a reserve, new between her and Stella. "Even I——"

"Tell me all about it, who was it?"

Vanessa ignored that. It was not of herself she came to speak. She could not put Joe Wallingford quite out of her mind, but David was reaping the benefit in a new consideration, and Sebastian in a remorseful absorption. She had been disloyal to both of them, she felt her responsibilities acutely, surprised and ashamed that anything, except literature, should have come, even momentarily, between her and them.

"No!—it—it was of no consequence. Only it taught me something of how men talk, feel, and act in given circumstances, almost without encouragement. I felt I must warn you. Lord Saighton was Jack's friend, and of course he has that in his mind. Probably so have you; but there comes a

moment, there might come a moment, when either of you, both of you——" she hesitated again, really exciting Stella's curiosity.

"This is quite a new development. You want to tell me that there might come a moment when I remembered I was a young woman, or Saighton reminded me that he was not an old man. And then. . . ." All at once her patience broke:

"How ridiculous you are! Why should we both remember. To whom are we in thraldom? Conventionality, Mrs. Grundy, you? Or do you think I owe Jack anything?"

"You have never spoken to me like this, don't do it, Stella. Of course, I know you do not mean it, but surely it is a bad habit to get into. You know, as well as I do, that we can write about light conduct, and read about immorality, more or less gross. But we cannot *live* it; you nor I."

She was quite hot at the thoughts that arose.

"The word morality has no meaning for me," answered Stella, almost sullenly, but not meeting Vanessa's eyes, busying herself with the orchids. "Here, leave off preaching. I'm tired of it. Saighton and I are very good friends. He is very kind to me. I suppose it is because of Jack. Talk of something else, I'm sick of it."

For a moment, a wild moment, she had thought Vanessa knew, or guessed, and that she could unburden her over-burdened mind. For a wild moment she felt the relief, the wonderful relief it would have been, if she might have spoken of what her life had been these last few years. What had filled, and emptied it. How well she knew that neither she nor Vanessa was of the type that could live happily where shame lay ambushed. But she and happiness had parted company since many years. Now she only wanted again that Vanessa should not divine her trouble. Had love

come into her sister's life, to soil it? It seemed impossible, Vanessa was as nearly as possible sexless. Marriage with such a man as David Rendall kept her where she stood.

"Who has been making love to you?" she asked, nevertheless. "It cannot be that Wallingford person; he is too *bourgeois* not to recognise the divinity of your household gods. It must have been some one you met at Hilda de Cliffe's, some one she asked there on purpose. She would hate to know a dog that had not lost its tail."

"Why do you call Joe Wallingford *bourgeois?*" Vanessa was glad to change the subject. She had said too much, or too little. She had given her warning, yet had been unable to word her sympathy.

"So it *is* Joe Wallingford?"

"I am disappointed you and he find no common ground."

"My dear! Everything about him is common ground, very common ground!"

It is possible both sisters were glad to switch the talk into a different channel. Vanessa's fears had been vague and formless. Her frankness was part of her character. She could not keep back what had been in her mind, but having delivered herself of it, she was glad to be free of the whole subject.

She could speak of Joe Wallingford warmly, and without reserve. If at Newmarket she had misled him, or he had misled her, it had been merely an experience for her, she told herself, something literary, removed from life, a moment's revelation. She liked the man, he interested her. She had not the least realised how much he had taught, or was teaching her, she had no interpretation of the message, save as it affected Stella. Vanessa, knowing so little, was ashamed of what she knew. She could not tell Stella more than she had told her.

Lord Saighton had looked at Stella as Joe Wallingford had once looked at her. But it had been, perhaps, unnecessary to warn her. The sudden fear had swift banishment.

She began to talk easily of Joe, and of his powers and prospects. Stella said:

"What on earth does it matter if one more demagogue gets into a House hopelessly vulgarised by Liberal and Labour members? Who cares? And anyway, why are you bothering about it? Let us talk about Sebastian. Joe Wallingford bores me."

And, of course, Vanessa was always willing, even eager, to talk of Sebastian.

There was something to talk about. If Vanessa had been sure of Stella's sympathy she would have told her before.

Sebastian wanted to go abroad. Already he was restless in business. But there was reason in his restlessness, Sebastian's ability was no figment of his mother's brain. He was working loyally with his father, but he could see so many things that escaped the routine blinded vision of the older man. Young as he was, and ignorant, he saw everywhere new machinery of trade, and in Queen Victoria Street, old, inoperative, out-of-date methods. It is incredible, but nevertheless true, that John and William Rendall kept their own books, wrote their own letters, and prided themselves on a traditional secrecy from their clerks as to the detail and management of the business; also on the smallness of their office expenses. Sebastian had already introduced typewriting machines, and shorthand clerks, a Dictophone, an installation of telephones, an adding-up machine, and everything which an enterprising, and specious, firm of American manufacturers could persuade him was essential to modern enterprise.

The thousand pounds or so, he spent on necessities, or wasted on business toys, was of little moment. But having procured the machinery for the office, human and otherwise, it became necessary to find grist to keep it working. The grist was new accounts; new accounts meant extended credits. David, watching Sebastian's growth with ever-quickening pride, toiling after him loyally, found himself soon apprehensive of where the enterprise would land them.

A few months, David Rendall had, of watching and teaching this strange young duckling that took so freely to the water. Then he began to fear for the depths, for the treacherous currents, swooping birds of prey, sportsmen with reckless guns. And fear was not good for David's health.

And now Sebastian had made the startling announcement that he wanted to go away for a year or two; that he was not going on making and selling hand-made paper when fortunes were being piled up on all sides of them by distributors of cheap grades of foreign machinised goods.

He argued, and Vanessa repeated these convincing arguments to Stella.

"He says that we would have been willing to send him to the 'Varsity to waste three years in lounging over the Classics, getting a degree that would have been no earthly use to P. and A. Rendall, even if it had been a First. He says he wants less than half that time to educate himself in the paper trade. He wants to go to Denmark and Sweden, and then over to America."

Sebastian had begun by pleading, gone on to urge, ended by taking it for granted that his request would be met, as his requests had ever been met. All this Vanessa told Stella.

It is only fair to Sebastian to say he had completely forgotten that he had originally decided to go into

business because he had learned the precariousness of his father's health. He had got used to David's indefinite delicacy. Seeing him active in town travelling, and taking his bi-weekly journey to the mills with regularity, it was perhaps natural in so young a man as Sebastian, and one of so sanguine a disposition, to take it for granted that if David had been ill he was cured, and that all he had been unhappy about was the continuance of the firm of P. and A. Rendall and Co.

And now Sebastian, himself, thought that was sufficient career. Only he saw it large, the meglomania of youth already cast an extraordinary glamour over the small trade. He felt he must have it all. He must supply England with paper; he would keep the hand-made as a nucleus, but already, whilst he was talking of acting as agent, of buying and distributing, he was seeing plant and machinery, he was building and manufacturing; great castles in the air were erecting themselves in his over-active brain.

"He thinks it right to leave us for a time; to study foreign markets, to learn all that is being done."

"But you! won't you miss him horribly?" Stella asked, forgetting herself and her troubles, for a moment, in the consideration of Vanessa's.

But to sacrifice themselves for Sebastian came naturally both to David and Vanessa. So that although the idea of losing his companionship was devastating to David, and made heart-ache for Vanessa, it had been agreed almost without argument. When the theatricals were over, and *Twelfth Night* out of the way, Sebastian would go.

David knew that, in a way, the boy was right in wishing to go outside their own business to learn what was being done, and how to do it. The very fear he had of everything that was new made him more fearful lest he err in checking it. He could

think of the business and consider if it would suffer more by Sebastian's absence now, than it would benefit by his return more fully armed. He could think of Vanessa, and realise how she would miss the daily sight, and expectation, of the boy, pity her that she should be condemned to a long spell of his own society; he could think of Sebastian, dread strangers, home-sickness, temptation for him. But he wasted no time at thinking, though it loomed heavy and dark before him, of what his own loneliness would be now he had almost forgotten to be lonely.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT passages or promises there had been between Sebastian, not yet twenty, and Pleasey Pleyden-Carr, some two or three years his senior, was never quite clear.

At the very end, when they were already at Southampton, steam up, and the boat about to start, the boy said something to his mother, which at the moment she regarded lightly. They were walking up and down on the quay; she had come to see him off; and David, too, was here. Everything had been said, and said again. Money, clothes, home letters, Sebastian's important instructions to his father as to the office work, had all been threshed out. David was on board, counting over the luggage. It was for a whole year they were parting with him; he had never before been out of their protecting care. And all their hearts were heavy.

"Don't make it worse than it is, mater. You don't suppose I like it, do you? But I know it has to be done. I must keep Rendall's on the top; I've got to learn about things; I want to make money. You'll neither of you stand in my way when I get back, will you? It isn't as if I were a boy."

"I don't think we have stood in your way," she answered. "I have made mistakes," she was thinking of Eton, she had not forgotten, either, how she had opposed his going into business "but it is difficult, all at once, to learn to be a mother. You have

a professorship thrust upon you, as it were, before you are through with your preliminary. I have always wanted to do the best for you."

"I know," already there was the whistle, and David had come down the gangway, and was making for them: "you've been a good sort, never a better; and the pater, too; don't think I don't know it. But—there is something I want to tell you. It is about Pleasey Pleyden-Carr. I don't want you to be hurt about it; it won't make any difference between you and me, she hasn't exactly promised anything, but we are going to write to each other. She is going to wait——"

Then there was David, out of breath, and nervous lest Sebastian should miss the boat. There were kisses, and the last good-byes, and no time for more words of confidences.

Vanessa heard, later on, from Stella, that there had been, apparently, some sort of love-making between Sebastian, and Bice's governess. But neither sister looked upon it as very serious.

Bice, of course, was passionately loyal, and serious, and secretive over it. Everything was to be kept a secret until Sebastian came back. In the meantime Bice was to be their best friend. She knew that he meant to marry Pleasey when business was on the right footing, when he was on the high road to fortune. Pleasey had not actually promised to wait, but she would write to him, and he would answer; and above all things, Bice was to keep him fully informed, and well supplied with news. If Pleasey had already a second string to her bow, neither of the honest cousins knew it. Her amiability and pale prettiness, her plaintiveness and poverty, had captured them both.

Sebastian Rendall remained away from England for rather less than a year. Vanessa filled the blank caused by his absence, by completing the abandoned

"*Between the Nisi and the Absolute.*" Incidentally, too, it may be related that, when published, it proved almost a complete failure. The paradoxes were forced, laboured, and the humanity that was her new objective, failed of *vraisemblance.* The fact was that she was learning something new, but she did not yet know enough of it to teach. The book was disjointed, unconvincing, weak. But, whilst it absorbed her, Stella had only a perfunctory attention, and David was again neglected, Joe Wallingford had become a mere model.

That was all he had done for her in the first year of their acquaintanceship. He had confused her artistry, set her to work from the life. She had endeavoured to reproduce him, and what he had tried to convey to her, on paper. But, not fully informed of what she wrote, she wrote badly. Even the most amiable reviewer could not say she had increased her reputation by the publication of "*Between the Nisi and the Absolute.*"

Meanwhile Sebastian was studying the paper trade, and David was feeling the burden of running an old business on new methods. The boy visited Sweden and Norway and Denmark, Switzerland and remote parts of Germany, becoming conversant with the jargon of his subject, with cellulose, and half-stuff, with felting and fibre, with esparto, and mechanical woods.

Then he had crossed the Atlantic, and wrote that he found himself strangely and immediately at home. He had, indeed, become enamoured of New York before he landed, inspired by the talk of a gentleman who talked enthusiastically about the prohibition States, and showed his appreciation by drinking deeply to their prosperity. Sebastian liked the bustle of it, and its utilitarian ugliness. The breathless, restless, business atmosphere suited him; the men, who always had time to tell him

they had none to spare, attracted him; and he picked up Yankee phrases, and an accentuated twang, before he had been a week on American soil.

He had useful introductions, and in the course of four to six months he visited the chief paper-mills in the States. At Washington he found the trade all agley with a new discovery, the manufacture of a pulp, superior to that produced from wood, and extraordinarily cheaper, from cornstalks; and he journeyed to Culpepper, where the experiments were being made. In an access of enthusiasm he was induced to give a large order, which incidentally, it may be noted, seriously embarrassed David, and the Rendall mills, when, some time afterwards, it arrived in London.

Outside Culpepper he visited a big truck farm, and familiarised himself with American *petit culture*, without bell glasses, but nevertheless profitable. "Truck farm" was a new word for Sebastian. He found it picturesque, and filled up half a letter with it.

But before the last of these letters arrived, that had happened in Harley Street which made Sebastian's return imperative.

Vanessa cabled as considerately as the circumstances permitted. The message reached him when he was still lingering in Washington.

"Should like you to return as soon as possible, Mater."

Sebastian showed the cable to the man who had put him up at the Metropolitan Club.

"They can't get along any longer without me, you see. I should not be surprised if it were my last letter that has made them keen. The pater is sharp enough to see we ought to have something in this new Combine. I guess, too, he wants to talk over that Stock proposition."

But even before he had finished his speech, his face grew clouded.

"It is such rot they don't say what I'm wanted for," he went on more slowly, interrogatively.

"Ay," said John P. Tibenham, who had put through the cornstalk deal.

John P. Tibenham's expression was enigmatic.

"Your boss keen on Combines?" he drawled out.

"You don't suppose there is anything wrong, do you?" said the boy.

"No-o; but they seem in a mighty hurry."

Sebastian's quickness realised what was in the other's mind.

And John P. went on to speak of trains, without going into the question of what the summons might mean. Sebastian did not argue it.

The next few hours passed in expediting his departure, in drinking rye whisky with men who wished him good luck, in a dream or a nightmare of good-byes.

But it was John P. who sent the cable to Vanessa, in order that the answer should meet the boy in New York:

"Starting *Mauretania* cable necessity."

Vanessa found it difficult to answer. She did not want the boy to have his long week at sea with a great grief to bear him company on the voyage. She could not tell him all the truth, nor withhold it.

Sebastian had the long railway journey in which to grow more and more anxious; in which fear knocked day and night at his heart. He would not let it in, his brain worked to keep it out. Aphorisms haunted his sleeplessness: "*Ill news travels apace.*" If there was ill news, he would have known it. Besides the pater was all right; every letter had assured him of it. Aunt Stella might be ill, or Uncle William worse. He fixed upon Uncle William finally and definitely. Of course

there would be things to settle up if Uncle William were to die. He could not help thinking that it would be a good thing for the business if some of the capital locked up in Uncle William were released. No one knew the contents of Uncle William's will; it was probable that the pater would benefit largely by it. It had been made many years ago: John's was ten years old. Secretly Sebastian thought John might have been less liberal to the Paper Trade Benevolent Fund, and more so to him. But then John had not expected to die.

Death was the intruder into Sebastian's thoughts during all that tedious journey to the coast. Vanessa's cable drove it away, but only for a time. Sebastian could not stupefy himself, even to become content.

"Pater seriously ill."

There had been no death. But the pater would never have so cabled, if the pater's hand or brain had been free to write or dictate. The Pater, Father, the Governor, Pupsy; loving words, and thoughts, chased with grey death, and peopled the *Mauretania* with shadows.

Sebastian found himself starting in his sleep at night, finding his pillow wet. Fear had knocked and knocked, and now found full admission. Sleeping and waking, his father's face was before his eyes. The boat made slow, crawling progress, the hours hung, and the hands of the clock lagged. Empty chatter went on, and a monotonous routine. If he were only sure he would be in time! There was no longer faltering before fear, he was enveloped in it; it chilled him, froze him, overwhelmed him. He found himself recalling, with sudden anguish, an impatient or disrespectful word; he had, ever and again, an overwhelming, sickening rush of longing for one more chance, another look at that dear face. He must be in time; he could not bear

it else. The dear pater, how generous he was, how unselfish! He must see him again, he must tell him.

Vanessa was on the dock at Liverpool. She had been there since seven. The grey, cold mist of the winter morning had got in front of her courage, and dimmed it a little. She was not in weeds; the boy must have no shock. She did not even now know what she would shout to him across the narrowing channel of water that so slowly closed between them. He was on the upper deck; she had her glasses with her and picked him out, before it had seemed possible. Her heart went out to him, leapt the waters and was with him.

He would guess, when he saw her, that her work at home was done. How slowly the big boat moved; with what incredible dilatoriness they swung out the stage for landing!

If it had not been for Joe Wallingford, there had been an hour or two more of this straining, she from the shore, and Sebastian from the upper deck, and no words between them. For officers of health, and from the office of the steamship, and the customs, must first go on board; then the big luggage must precede the passengers. But Vanessa's "pass" over-rode all these. The officials, at foot of the gangway, could not understand it when it was first shown them.

"Well, all the years I've been here, I've never seen one like this," one said to the other, showing it. But they had to let her up, reluctantly. And on the big boat, too, they looked at it with surprise. It was all right, however, apparently, for one of the stewards was called, and bidden to find Mr. Rendall.

Sebastian was walking the upper deck, smoking overwhelmingly, trying to be patient. He had not expected her here. He had informed himself of the procedure, and the delay in landing.

When the man told him he was "wanted in the cabin," his mind leapt at once to keys and customs, and he felt in his pockets as he descended leisurely.

His face flushed, then went white, when he saw her.

"Oh! it's you!" and his voice faltered in speaking. "How is he?" But he knew; he knew before she answered.

"I took the first boat," he went on, dully.

"It was absolutely sudden. He had no pain; he was asleep."

"He had not asked for me?"

"He had been talking about you the evening before. We talked about you every evening."

It was difficult to hold back his anguish. He had feared, but hope had been there too. He had only wanted one more look, a last word, just to tell him there had never been such a father; and that he knew it, even if he had not always been respectful, or shown what he felt.

"It's—it's damned hard lines," he said, and burst into tears.

She tried to comfort him. It was new to him, but nearly two weeks old to her. And here was Sebastian, taller, more manly to look upon, but her boy, Sebastian, all her boys in one. The little one of whose future she had dreamed, and the big one of whom she had been so proud, and the one who had cast in his lot with his father: perhaps she had become proudest of all of that one. And now the one who was here, his head in her lap, her hand on his dear, dark hair. She bent and kissed it; time and the failure of her book had softened her, taught her a few tender words.

"It is worse for you," he said, when he had a little recovered himself, and began to be ashamed of his breakdown, getting up from his knees. "Poor old mater! You must have had an awful time.

I'll hear all about it presently. I suppose I ought to be getting my things together. How did you manage to get on board ? "

The tears started again, quite naturally. It was wonderful what a boy he was still, although so tall, and travelled.

" I will take care of you. We'll stick together."

The words were almost irrelevant. But she saw that he was filled with tenderness for her, picturing her desolate, never having quite known how it had been between her and David.

She told him much that he wanted to hear on their way back to London. By mutual consent they avoided sentiment, and confined themselves to business. She did not want him to be hurt by the contents of his father's will. It was contained in three lines, he had left everything he possessed to " his dear wife." She was his sole trustee and executrix. In telling Sebastian of it, presently, she said that he and she were one, and that his father knew this, and that their interests were identical. The will was made recently, after the trouble over John's executors, and the legal questions that had arisen.

" He wanted to avoid taking capital from the business, or investing in trust stocks for you, or for me. He thought it over, and over again ; it worried him a good deal. In the end he said he knew all I cared for was you, and that I would not hamper you in anything." She was almost apologetic, but Sebastian took it from a lofty standpoint.

" My dear mater, the money is a mere fleabite, it doesn't even count. The pater was satisfied with a competence. I am going to make a fortune. Of course, you will leave all the capital in the business, and we shall probably have to get some more from somewhere or other. I have made up my mind to rebuild the mills, to have at least two new

machines. It will take a few years, but I'll make a rich woman of you. I have learnt a lot since I've been away; we are asleep over here, gone to seed, played out. I am going to make things hum."

It was advisable to keep him on the business note, to lead him to talk of what he had seen and learnt. He had another breakdown on getting to Harley Street. She found him, late in the evening, lying on the bed, face downward, sobbing his heart out.

"He was so good to me——. I never half told him——"

It was strange to Vanessa that any one could grieve so for David. For herself, she felt as if her chains were struck off. No sense of duty unfulfilled now hung about, and depressed her. She was acutely conscious of her new freedom, and it was difficult to suppress the sense of it before Sebastian.

"But he knew what a good son you had always been. He said so often, and that if he never saw you again, I was to tell you."

"Did he feel ill?"

"No. But it seems he knew his life was precarious."

She sat by his bedside many nights, talking to him, of his father, and other things. He made her leave his door open, to feel the sense of companionship with her, a childish trick. He could not bear to be alone.

Death filled the house, chilling and trying his nerve. Sebastian had been nervous as a child, he could never bear darkness, nor solitude. All his childish habits, reviving, supplied some craving in her, filled some place she had not known was empty. She was surprised at her happiness, his need of her. And love grew. He had the softer heart of the two; in some few ways was the weaker. So he leant upon her, and she gave him all her

strength, and was very happy in giving, and in realising just where his need lay.

He was young for the burden thrust upon him. The old business, the old name, John's executorship, and William's trusteeship, all seemed to fall at once into Sebastian's hands. That was a burden he grew quickly to meet. No one hearing them discussing money matters would have guessed that it was she, and not he, to whom everything belonged. She was glad he felt this, and that he had no resentment that David's will had made no mention of him.

Sebastian decided no money was to be withdrawn from the business, no settlement was to be made upon her.

"You draw a jolly good income," he said; "I suppose it will not be long before you get double what you had in the pater's time. I shall not want much for myself, living at home with you. I will take £500 per annum, and you can have the rest," he told her, magnanimously. And they vied with each other in their mutual generosity.

Apart from business, invested in trust stocks, the money David had left would hardly give her £2000 a year. But in business, in Sebastian's able hands, he said it could not pay her less than 20 per cent.; it would rise to 100 per cent! His optimism was complete, his faith in himself unbounded.

CHAPTER XVI

It is extraordinary how little difference David's death made to the house in Harley Street. The clean, sweet, unselfish life dropped out of it as if it had never been. Sebastian soon ceased weeping for him. David Rendall left an influence, hardly a memory, he had never made himself felt in the house. Remorse touched Vanessa sometimes, grief never. Sebastian had little with which to reproach himself, but his father's ways had irked him sometimes. David's beautiful unselfishness had tempted both of them into negligence. It was many years before Vanessa really realised the character of the man by whose side she had lived for twenty years. He passed silently into the great silence, but everywhere his feet had trodden was the better for his passing. His secret charities, his fine integrity, his loving kindness to friends and brothers, wife and son, became gradually clear, and ever clearer. To his son, who had dimly divined him, the memory of him became as a holy place where feet trod softly.

Sebastian was a boy when he left England, he was still a boy when he returned to it. Bice and Pleasey Pleyden-Carr soon consoled him for the loss of his father. He talked largely to them of his responsibilities, of the burden of his mother's interests, of the reforms he had effected, or would effect in the firm.

Almost immediately after his return home he started putting into execution some of his plans for

the extension of the business. He was really a young man of great parts, the future proved, or is proving it, it was his misfortune that he had to control capital and expenditure before he had learnt their relations.

In the meantime there were new agencies, and travellers to push them, the enlargement of the mills, and the acquisition of new machinery. P. and A. Rendall had quietly, almost privately, disposed of their own hand-made paper for four generations. Young Rendall, as he was called, began to compete in other branches, in all branches. He would be a paper-maker, and an agent representing foreign mills, he announced himself as a "wholesale stationer" and would have accepted printing, or any other contract that was offered to him; going out of his way to look for illegitimate business. There was resentment, indignation in the trade. For the firm had held a unique place, and there was much shaking of heads, and prophecies of disaster. But above all things there was what Sebastian most enjoyed. There was talk about him; the City discussed him, and his plans,

The boy's vanity was excited by his competitors, by the old men who came in to tell him of the old traditions, and seriously to urge him to walk in the same path as his grandfather and father, his uncles and great uncles; by young and middle-aged men, who explained to him how unexperienced he was, or he would not have done this, or that, directing his attention to business etiquette. It was pure enjoyment to him to spread out in the places he was told were barred to him. He had little or no experience, that was perfectly true, but he had an extraordinary energy, a vanity and faith in himself that were alike unbounded.

There had been, at the very beginning, some necessary talk with his mother about income and ex-

penditure. She quite saw that all the money David left should remain in the business, and that Sebastian should have the full use of it and full authority. He told her candidly it was not her subject, and she agreed with him. She was quite content to leave herself and her income in his hands.

Everything Sebastian did, he did, in a sense, dramatically. He told Vanessa if she had every necessity during his father's lifetime, she would have more than that, she would have luxuries, and great wealth, soon after he had gathered the reins properly in his own hands, and was driving full speed. In the meantime he arranged that she should draw £4000 per annum, and he should take £500.

"I suppose you make another £1000 or so from your royalties, and £700 or £800 from your father's estate. That gives you about £6000, and we will go on with that until I begin to make big money."

And then he built castles in the air. Vanessa's income, by the way, was one of them. If she wrote a novel she was generally able to get advance royalties on it up to £250, on one or two occasions she received another £20 or £35. A few articles were highly paid, that is, at about ten to fifteen guineas an article. She rarely wrote more than four or five of these in the course of a year. Some years she produced no novel.

Hepplewight-Ventom had left about £23,000, from which an income of under £1000 was produced, and this she halved with Stella.

Money had never interested Vanessa, she had all she wanted materially, rather more, from David, and her own income, earned and inherited, went in *bibelots*. She had no extravagances such as perplex smaller women in their daily life. She did not gamble, nor dress beyond her station, she had a horror of debt, and paid her bills when they came in.

She was generous, but that was a luxury she could afford. Her quarter's allowance covered the quarter's expenses, the rest was for those who needed it.

But Sebastian made money, or, rather, the acquisition of it, the topic at breakfast and the topic at dinner, and through evenings that at last grew wearisome on the one note. It seemed sordid to her, and a little vulgar. Had it been any one but Sebastian who held forth in such a manner, she would have checked, and resented it. As it was, she tried to meet his views by putting the household on a more lavish scale. David never quite accustomed himself to extravagant expenditure, either in the City, or in his private life; he had frugal tastes and inherited instincts. In Queen Victoria Street, and at home, expenses grew at a proportionate rate.

There was no display, neither Sebastian nor Vanessa had to buy society. In truth they neither of them cared for ordinary social functions. Their individualities were too strong. They had to be *the* guests, or found themselves bored. As host, too, although Vanessa never acknowledged it even to herself, the boy was scarcely an improvement on his father. It was the right and proper thing, sometimes even it was an interesting thing, to hear Sebastian, when alone with her of an evening, relate all the details and embroglio of the paper trade. He told her of the new "Association of Wholesale Stationers" that he boasted was as a Trust, or Combine against him personally, and he schemed how he should meet it. But it was quite another matter when she entertained her friends and he dashed, relentlessly, into congenial talk of Fabianism, or Free Trade, with irrelevant personal information as to how he was pushing P. and A. Rendall. It was always the "paper trade" with Sebastian; she grew bored with the very name of P. and A. Rendall,

but disguised it, for its exponent was very dear to her, although now he satisfied her critical taste so much less fully than she had hoped. She even detected a gradual alteration in his speech, a shade, or intonation that vexed her ear. She forced herself from this mentally critical attitude, surely she loved him, and Stella? For all her self-communings and analysis, she could never quite persuade herself she had any capacity of great affection outside these two.

Joe Wallingford had lost no time after David's death in asking her to share his millions. With a man like Joe, having a shrewd idea of the terms on which Vanessa lived with her husband, there was no need for delicacy, or restraint, in putting forward his suit.

He had written to her, even before Sebastian returned from America. She answered, quite candidly and unreservedly, that married life had no lure for her, she was glad of her freedom, and meant to retain it; Sebastian and Stella were sufficient ties. She told him again that she was primarily an authoress, and because her last book had been badly received she was keener than ever about the next. The correspondence between them began before David had been dead a month. Joe was not dissatisfied with the progress he was making. He never deceived himself into thinking she would be easy to woo.

After Sebastian's return, Joe came again to Harley Street, She had refused to marry him, but she was glad of his proffered friendship, she valued it, too, for the boy.

Joe Wallingford was the one *habitué* of the house, which had so soon resumed its normal aspect and hospitality, before whom the boy's talk never appeared intrusive or banal. It might be egotistic, but it was not any longer incongruous. The rest

of the circle were cultivated, or literary, people. Sebastian found no interest at the moment save in himself or his work. Thus it came about that to both mother and son, Joe was their most welcome visitor.

"He is getting on all right?" Joe asked her one evening, some eight or nine months after David's death. "He seems to take a great interest in the business. You don't think he is going a bit too fast?"

"Oh, no, everything is very flourishing."

She laughed.

"He tells me I am to buy as much china as I want, he begs me to deny myself nothing. He is such a good son, he wants me not to miss David's generosity. But really, David never encouraged me to spend as Sebastian does. I am quite ashamed sometimes of the amount I draw. But he says I have £6000 a year, and there is no reason to save."

"You have left all your money in the business?" Joe asked, with apparent carelessness. He had a lurking doubt or two, but was content with the position, honest nevertheless. "It is a great responsibility for so young a man, without much experience."

"He learnt a great deal whilst he was away. He is really not to be judged by any standard that applies to ordinary young men," she answered, easily.

Once or twice, on other occasions, Joe tried to convey to her his sense that Sebastian was playing a big game before he had learnt the rules. But she was deaf, or careless, to any hint. And, after all, Joe had nothing to gain by forcing that view upon her.

Vanessa could not feel anxiety or uneasiness about the present, or the future, of Messrs. P. and

A. Rendall; she was only rather bored by it. But she could grow anxious or worried about other matters in connection with the boy, and her ever-deepening sense of responsibility toward him took on a new complexion about this time.

Miss Pleasey Pleyden-Carr was the *fons et origo mali* of the change.

Pleasey, with a second string to her bow, intriguing behind Bice's back, looking upon Sebastian as a boy, but a boy who might one day be rich, played him with more cleverness than one could have credited to her. Sebastian was encouraged one moment, and held at arm's length the next. He found it difficult to get at close quarters with his lady love. She would not hear of an engagement, she was not sure if she cared for him enough! She was coy, and sometimes amenable, but she was never definite. She came between him and his business, distracting his mind, but entertaining his evenings, and many of his Sundays.

The room behind the dining-room in Weymouth Street belonged still to the young people. No one interfered if Bice chose to leave it to Sebastian and Pleasey, to curl herself up with a novel in the dining-room, and let them be undisturbed. That a certain amount of love-making went on is indubitable; Bice was an accessory before the act, as the legal phrasing runs. Bice knew nothing of Bob Hayling. Pleasey had leisure and many opportunities, whilst Bice attended classes at Queen's College, performed a limited number of social duties, filled her mother's unoccupied hours, playing the part of the only daughter of the house. *She* was loyal to Sebastian. She was as limited as her Aunt Vanessa in her affections, her delicate mother, and Sebastian, absorbed them all. Pleasey shone with a reflected glory. Bice knew nothing of Bob Hayling, of the second string to Pleasey's bow.

Then came a day when Pleasey discovered that she was not "doing right" in encouraging Sebastian's attentions, when she began to avoid *tête-à-têtes*, and make a display of prudery. The thing grew. She said she was too old for him, she resorted to tears, and repented she should ever have allowed him to kiss her. The episode ended by her seeking an interview with Stella, and tendering a month's notice. She was agitated, and tremulous, and vaguely candid. She told Stella all about Sebastian's love making. She said she thought she had better go home to her father and mother. They were *so* anxious about it, they were *so* particular.

"I shouldn't worry about it," Stella told her, soothingly. "He is only a boy, he is not twenty-one yet. You are three or four years older than he——"

"Two," interposed Pleasey, mendaciously. "Well! hardly more than eighteen months. My birthday is in May," she added, thinking she had perhaps gone too far on the road to veracity.

"What is the harm of his making love to you? He has always done it, more or less, hasn't he?" Stella went on, carelessly. She thought Miss Pleyden-Carr was making too much of the circumstance.

"It—it isn't only his making love to me." Pleasey became indefinitely confidential. Stella had always liked her for her prettiness, and tact, for her gift of putting her clothes on well, and keeping Bice content. Stella thought things had better go on as they were, it would keep Sebastian out of mischief. Stella had a very definite notion of how much mischief a boy could get into, if he set his mind to it.

Pleasey suddenly confessed that he wanted her to promise to marry him!

Stella laughed.

"But surely you are not bound to do it because he asks you! And you have always Bice with you. Don't make a fuss, there's a good girl, I

have not time to get any one else to be with Bice. What is the good of bothering? All young men fall in love with women older than themselves. But they get over it, you need not give him any great encouragement, very little will satisfy him, and he is sure to eventually like some one else even better. Boys are not very constant; you have nothing to fear from him, the "young Lochinvar" days are out of fashion."

Pleasey omitted to state how much encouragement she had already administered. She played her game very well indeed, and eventually converted Stella from an active, to a passive, opponent of her going home for a few months.

"I cannot be here, and not see him. I do not want to deprive Bice of his companionship. I really think I ought to go, you don't know how impetuous he is——" Pleasey could even blush to command.

It was agreed she should rejoin her family circle for six months. Stella gave her a handsome present. Lord Saighton sent her father an additional cheque. He and Stella agreed she had behaved extremely well.

"It won't do to have that young fellow hanging about her here; it is not good for Bice, nor for any of them," Saighton said, authoritatively.

Stella, who was only reticent about her own affairs, could not resist sharing Pleasey's confidences with Vanessa.

"Your Bayard has been making love to Bice's companion," was the way she started the conversation, the very afternoon that it had been decided Pleasey should go home with her cheques.

"That is an old story, is it not?" Vanessa answered, indifferently. "I thought I heard something about it before he went abroad. Has it begun again?"

"Begun again! It appears it never left off; they corresponded all the time."

"He never speaks of her to me."

"That is a bad sign."

"It is a sign he does not deem the affair important."

Vanessa could not be uneasy. Sebastian was still exceptional and significant to her. Ambrose Pleyden-Carr's daughter seemed an emasculate young person, quite unworthy of serious consideration in such a connection.

Stella did not like her news accepted so indifferently.

"You may say it is unimportant, but Sebastian is madly in love with her."

"Calf love!" said Vanessa, looking again at Stella's array of orchids. "I should not dream of interfering with him, nor forcing his confidence. She is a feeble young person with a habit of saying, 'Oh! really!' She varies it sometimes with, 'Fancy that!' Unless you mind them meeting here, I do not see any harm in it. She will soon tire him. I find five minutes of her vague insincerity quite enough for me; so will he, presently."

"You under-rate her. She has a lovely figure, puts on her clothes like a Parisian, and has at least a yard and a half of fair hair."

"She is an albino, mentally and morally anæmic. I have only seen her a few times, but I am sure she is not going to be seriously dangerous. Besides, Sebastian is absorbed in business. Really, Stella, this is a hare you have started."

"I have not started it."

"Or are pursuing. The boy is serious minded."

"Pleasey told me, herself."

"She is at an age when she must invent adventures if she fail in encountering them."

"Well, don't say you have not been warned."

"In another five years I may begin to take Sebastian's love affairs seriously. You don't understand him."

Stella laughed.

"He is not very difficult."

"He is fonder of his cousin than of her companion. He has really a very fine appreciation of Bice. He was only saying the other day——"

There was no use urging the matter any further. Vanessa was determined not to see, and after all, no harm had been done. Pleasey indulged herself in a last scene with the boy before returning to that shabby home in Wimbledon, and the easy *rendez-vous* with Bob Hayling. She contrived to put Sebastian completely in the wrong. He had certain privileges, and it appeared he had exceeded them. He thought he was engaged, whereas it transpired he had only been on probation. Certainly an early marriage had not been in his mind. He must wait until affairs were on a more settled basis in Queen Victoria Street. But he wanted the privileges of a lover. At a hint that she was going away, that he would not see her again for some months, his ardour broke through some new bonds that she had imposed on herself, or him. She resented it most plaintively, and distracted him beyond words. What he had done he never quite knew. But it was all over, his love rejected, his pride hurt, his intelligence bewildered. Whatever was between them was at an end. He had misunderstood her, apparently, from the very beginning.

"She has done with me," he told Bice.

And for the moment she meant it. He was only a boy, dependent on his mother. Pleasey knew all about the will. Mr. Robert Hayling had a motor-car, and a pretty lavish way of ordering luncheons and dinners. She had been meeting him now and again for over a year, but their opportunities

had been limited. It was he who had suggested that she should give up her situation, and go home. He must mean something by it, and she wanted to find out exactly what he meant. Sometimes she fancied herself in love with Bob Hayling. He was really a fine man, somewhere about forty, with expressive eyes, his hair grey on the temples, his manner with women extraordinarily confident. One could get a thrill out of a man like that. There was no thrill to be had from Sebastian Rendall's boyish passion for her.

But she had prevision, she kept her retreat open, parting from Bice with tears and promises of constant visits, dismissing Sebastian with a vague promise of future friendship, impressing even the amused Stella with the belief that she was really acting from conscientious motives.

CHAPTER XVII

VANESSA, when she heard that Miss Pleyden-Carr had left the Ashtons, only observed that she thought it was "a very good thing." She did not immediately ascribe the change in Sebastian's habits to Pleasey's absence from Weymouth Street. She was ever a writer of romance, rather than an interpreter of human motives and actions.

Business became now Sebastian's only objective. Pleasey Pleyden-Carr may have obscured his outlook, but such as she could not definitely affect the mainspring of his character. He told his mother, about this time, that "things were beginning to move." In truth, Sebastian was reaping the benefit of the name that had been built up, and the principles with which his father had imbued him. Competitors resented him, but new clients liked the long credits, and the reliable quality. And when they came in contact with him, they liked the eager youngster, who was really a good salesman, and keen to do business against his rivals, at almost any price that offered. He talked very freely about "turnover," he took the world into his confidence. He felt he had had a good day when he had made a big contract, even if he had accepted it at a loss, or if he had sold old stock at, or under cost, without taking into consideration that it had been accumulating interest.

The defection of Pleasey but accelerated the activity at the mills and in Queen Victoria Street.

Incidentally perhaps she necessitated it. The business was widening and extending, the purely clerical work growing heavier and heavier; humming and buzzing filled the office, no trace was left of the prosperous, leisurely, quietude that had reigned there in the time of Sebastian's father and uncles. The business, the capital, the income, were all in the boy's young hands. He had none to interfere with, nor hamper him, and he could start one large scheme after another without old-fashioned caution cramping, or paralysing, his action. The very word "over trading" was outside his commercial dictionary, it had been a figment of his father's brain, part of his illness. Sebastian felt the necessity for enlarging the mills, importing more machinery, trying every new pulp, and combination of pulps, putting a hundred eggs in a hundred baskets, relying on his brain to market them all safely, counting cost neither of baskets nor eggs. Reaction from the disappointment over Pleasey took the immediate first form of an added vanity in his City success, or that which looked so like success, on the surface.

"You don't meet men of my calibre in the City," he told his mother, quite simply.

"I shall sweep the board, they don't understand a business policy over here, it is all just buying and selling with them. I am going for monopolies. When I have put everything in order at the mills, I shall have a go at the wall paper trust; we are making long elephant already! I am getting it out at a wonderful price, with that new machine of mine. They don't like it at Greenhithe, I can tell you that. J. D. Rockefeller cornered oil when he had more against him than I have."

He still talked continuously of the one subject. He did not want to discuss anything else. He made no confidences about his love affair, and Vanessa did not press for them. Even Bice's

sympathy had to remain wordless. She was furious with Pleasey's betrayal. But the boy's sensitiveness covered itself with P. and A. Rendall, as with a garment.

There were difficulties ahead, and these, too, he doubled, for distraction.

"I am plunging a bit," he admitted to Vanessa, "you don't mind a fair trading risk, do you, mater?"

She had very little idea what was a fair, or unfair, trading risk; she was satisfied, without being curious, so long as the boy was content in what seemed to her, nevertheless, very uncongenial work. Joe Wallingford's warning had reached no further than her external ear. She had resented the failure of her last book more than she admitted, even to herself. She was laying down the foundations of another. Perhaps that was why she was slow in associating Pleasey's defection with a certain development in Sebastian's conduct.

Sebastian's subsequent few months had many excuses. His father's death, Pleasey's unreasonable dismissal, chilled for the moment what was warmest and best in him. The sentient parts, that remained unaffected, were occupied entirely in mundane things. He saw City men, and heard the talk of City men, at luncheons, in private offices, in interchange of "drinks" at the conclusion of a bargain. And often it was coarse talk, and anecdote, he heard.

Years of compulsory football at school had given him a distaste for all forms of exercise, so there was no outlet there. Both the spiritual side of him, for the boy had ideals, and a spiritual side, and the intellectual side of him, and that too is undeniable, suffered temporary eclipse. Materialism was what he had brought back from America, not dogma perhaps, but a careless acceptance. There was no real viciousness, but some curiosity, and an absence of creed. Quite deep down, un-

confessed, the ever-aching wound of Pleasey's rejection affected his moral health.

By the time a new book was planned, and Vanessa fully awakened, she discovered that Sebastian was no longer content to spend his evenings alone with her in the drawing-room. He had found that "life" was part of the equipment of a business man, and had decided upon penetrating its mysteries.

Reticence was no part of the scheme, quite the contrary. After all, "the mater is a woman of the world," he argued, and "a novelist." The new side of life he was learning was bound to interest her.

He talked about it at breakfast, and through dinner. It is far more difficult to lead a fast life in London than it is in Paris, or Vienna, in Buda Pesth, or Simla, for instance, but it is not impossible. Sebastian's curiosity was gratified long before he became in any way entangled, or individually held, by what he saw and learnt.

Vanessa's instinctive purity shrank from what Sebastian told her, but she thought it was right that she should listen. The unhappiness that lurks in wait for all loving mothers of adolescent sons sprang upon her presently, fastening claws of apprehension in all her tender parts.

At first he skated over thin ice, and she missed seeing that there were depths. It was this wide, misty vision of hers that made her an indifferent novelist, she always saw surfaces. Sebastian, however, only needed a listener, it did not matter to him how much, or little, she saw, or misunderstood. All his instincts were good, he was not David's son for nothing. But he had been chaffed by his City friends, comments were made, and doubts thrown on his manhood, when he abstained from taking part in loose talk, or found no food for laughter in coarse anecdote. Vanity over-rode his own secret antipathy to impure things. He only wanted to

know, it was only curiosity he had, not evil instinct.

He met a woman who quoted Euripides, spoke three or four modern languages, yet supped by herself at a table at the Continental Hotel, and shared it with any one who would pay for her society. He could not but talk to Vanessa of this woman, and he described her flat, and sought for the clue to her downfall.

There was another, French or Russian, who took a fancy to him, and invited him to her house in Mayfair. Sebastian described how, when he called, he was shown up to her room, and how calmly she continued her toilette before him. It was her lost attribute of modesty that interested him, and her utter want of moral sense, not the woman, not Sacha, herself.

"It is so jolly to be able to talk to you about everything," he said to Vanessa, "you are so sensible. It is the psychology of the thing that interests me. You don't mind hearing about it, do you? I shall write about it myself, one day, if you don't take it up, '*Autour du demi-monde*,' I shall call the book. I suppose my French is good enough, and if not, you could polish it up for me. It wouldn't do in English, the British public like their powders in jam."

This was in the beginning. And to his Aunt Stella he said:

"I am helping the mater to a lot of new copy. There are a number of things she knows nothing whatever about. Come to think about it, Stella,"—for he refused the prefix "Aunt" since he had become a man, and she liked the impertinence. "I suppose I ought not to tell her, but there are ripping stories that have never been written, and she seems rather to have slackened off in her writing. '*Between the Nisi and the Absolute*' was a frost. She

doesn't know enough, that's the trouble. Sometimes one would think she had never grown up, nor had her eyes opened; she seems so curiously remote. I used to take her for granted, but now I think about her," he added, ingenuously. "I believe it will do her a lot of good to hear about the things I am seeing."

"I should think the stories you tell her might prove unpublishable."

"No! what can be lived can be written."

"Theoretic, French, and untenable."

"Well, they ought to be written."

"You don't tell them to Bice, I hope?"

"What do you take me for?"

"I am not quite sure that your mother knows more than Bice," she murmured.

"She is extraordinarily innocent, isn't she?" he went on, confidentially. "I test her now and then, and she takes my breath away. But she thinks she knows life backward, that is the funny thing about it."

"I'm not quite sure you ought to discuss your mother."

"It is all right if I only do it with you," he said, easily, "there is something about twins—besides I am not saying anything I shouldn't. We both know there is no one like her. She came down to Queen Victoria Street the other day, and Hayling was there, you've heard of Hayling, haven't you?—senior partner in Hayling and Johnson. They never did a stroke with us until I came on, they were rather by way of being competitors, they've got their own mills. But now I do a lot of business with them, and I shall do more before long. He met the mater, and I introduced them. He said he didn't know I had a sister! Never could believe she was my mother. Don't you think she is looking younger than ever?"

"Happier." Stella knew Vanessa was happy in her freedom.

"That's rot, she is lonely, I suppose," he had never got close to the truth about Vanessa's attitude toward his father, "but I think she is going on all right. We talk of starting a book, or play, in collaboration. Not that our talents march together. I am really quicker, you know, up and dressed, so to speak, before she's out of bed. Besides I'm so dog tired of an evening, that business of mine is a fearful strain——"

Vanessa was exerting herself now that Sebastian should miss nothing in her companionship. Always she had intended to be father and mother to him, and had been full of theories. At this juncture she felt it might be a father he needed. In truth she hated the nights he was out, and feared the things he would tell her in the mornings. She concealed her feelings, she was ashamed of them. She, too, thought a knowledge of "life" might be essential, and sought for the cause of her late failure in her ignorance of ugly things. But she began to be haunted by ugliness, and always more to dread Sebastian's revelations. It was impossible to conceal her distress of mind. Stella laughed at her when a few halting words revealed the cause of a growing restlessness, and anxiety of demeanour.

"Are you worrying yourself into a shadow, because Sebastian is stopping out late, or going out of town from Friday until Monday? What did you expect of him, you did not want him to be a saint, I suppose? How can you make yourself so ridiculous about that boy, I can't make it out."

And Hilda de Cliffe, who had her own quick way of gratifying a curiosity, was no more sympathetic.

"Do tell me, I am just like Rosa Dartle, I always want to know. Is it true that Sebastian is getting up London life for you? Has he made

any wonderful discoveries, are they going to be in your next book ? "

Vanessa found curiosity, sympathy, and comment equally hard to bear. And indeed Sebastian's impetuosity, and way of flinging himself entirely into the affair of the moment, made the position dangerous. Sometimes he gave, at breakfast or dinner, a lurid glimpse into his evening life. But she never could quite grasp if he coloured, or cleared it of colour.

Whilst he remained curious only, and a student, she was completely in his confidence. There came a time, however, when he penetrated the arcana, and what he saw, he had no wish to tell her. But she had glimpses.

" Mater, could you let me have £250. I made a bit of an ass of myself last night," he said to her one morning, " without inconvenience, I mean."

" Whatever I have is yours, of course. I think there is more than that in the bank, doing nothing."

He looked rather pale, his eyes were not quite as bright as they had been, and there were shadows under them. He was very thin.

" I am keeping awful hours," it was at breakfast, but he was yawning. " I never got home until four this morning, three hours' sleep isn't enough for a fellow, is it ? But I have not been late in the City any morning, have I ? " He wanted her commendation. " A fellow must live through this sort of thing."

She, too, was tired this morning, having listened for his footstep, and given rein to her imagination, through a lurid night.

" Shall I write you the cheque now ? "

" You don't ask what it is for ? "

" Why should I ? You will tell me if you want me to know."

"You can hear, if you like. I rather hate having been such an ass."

"You said you were going to the American ball."

"So I did. I met some people I knew."

"Some one you knew in America?"

"Not a bit of it. It isn't Americans who go to this sort of function, they want to get away from their own people. I can't tell you now, I must be off. This damned office is getting on my nerves. I feel like a galley slave, chained to the oar. I'll tell you all about it this evening; I shan't go out, I'm tired of it all."

His morning mood dismayed her. She thought nothing of the cheque. Vanessa's generosity was not even admirable, she always had more than she wanted. But the boy left behind him that morning almost every species of misgiving. He was tired of City work! She had anticipated the moment; but now it seemed a weakness. Joe had warned her of a possible failure. And she wanted to have been able to boast to him of an overwhelming success. The boy was overstraining himself, physically, through want of sleep. He had eaten no breakfast, and admitted he had drank more than was good for him last night. He had admitted, too, that he had made a fool of himself, and this was the first time she had heard him self condemnatory.

The day was full of fears, and she tortured herself with questions. She had had such fine material entrusted her. The boy had brain, and heart, and capacity. What had she done, or left undone, that he should have come to this pass? And of course she exaggerated the nature of the "pass," dreaming of crevasse and precipice, whilst as yet, it was only that the sky was slightly overcast, and the air cold.

That same evening, enervated, slack, and sorry

for himself, Sebastian gave her an outline of what had occurred to him. She was glad to have him at home, and made him drink champagne with his dinner. Now she bade him lie on the sofa, she adjusted the pillows, and turned the lamp low.

"You are not looking well," was an involuntary statement, although it was so obviously true. He took a little pride in his dissipated appearance; and went over to the mirror, before he accepted the sofa, and the cushions.

"I am thin, aren't I?" he said, ingenuously, "you can't burn the candle at both ends without feeling it. Isn't that four nights running that I've been on the go. I shall have to pull up."

But it was clear he was not really ashamed. All these months he had only been a looker-on. He remained an idealist, and, true to his ideals, it was only knowledge that he sought. On the subject of the cheque that had been required, however, he was a little ashamed.

"I ought to have tumbled to it, of course. I was cheated. I played poker before, in the States, but that was among friends, dollar rises."

She was listening with all her ears and intelligence. It was a gambling debt then that she had discharged.

He flung himself on the sofa, and went on:

"Hayling was at the ball, with rather a rowdy party. We really had quite a good time," he began to recall the events of the evening with a certain relish, notwithstanding the climax. "I danced a lot, and there was plenty of champagne. Hayling rather flung it about, I was tired before I started, and wanted bucking up. It was Independence Day, and we strained the point, perhaps; American songs and choruses, waving flags and so on, you know the sort of thing. A little woman that I'd been dancing with most of the evening, she had

reddish hair, and a ripping figure, asked me to get her out of it. She said it was getting too hot; it *was* rather hot."

He smiled reminiscently at a rowdyism in which he had been rather spectator than actor. "Of course I couldn't do less than see her home. She has a flat in Victoria Street. Nothing could have been more domesticated; I stumbled over a perambulator in the passage. She asked me to come in, she said her husband would be sitting up, would like to thank me for my kindness to her. She told me he was an Englishman, an old Etonian, so of course he would not celebrate an Independence Day. Well, mater, he *was* a very nice chap, and he had been in Luxmore's house. We had a whisky and soda together, and talked about the place. He had been rather good at racquets; and he agreed with what I said, that we only really begin to care for Eton after we have left it. I would not give up my memories of Eton for anything, now, and I hated it all the time I was there, and so had he. It was too early to turn in! I think it was her suggestion to send into the other flat, and finish up the evening with a game of poker. Anyway he went to see if there was anyone there, and I got on all right with her alone."

His smile, at the remembrance of the few moments he had with this attractive, red-haired young woman, was rather that of a mischievous school boy, than of a dissipated young man.

"He brought back two pals of his, or hers, they were both in the army, oldish men. I didn't care for either. They had to teach me the game, I had forgotten the values, although I knew all about the 'rises' and 'blinds.' I don't think we fixed any limit. To make a long story short, I won at first, and then I lost. I got the needle, and played it up. Then I drew four kings, and went up to £150. There

were four aces against me! I had had enough of it then. They were very nice about it, I must say that for them, they were sorry I'd lost, and said I could have my revenge any time. I hadn't the money on me, so I gave an I.O.U. for it."

"It was very unlucky."

She did not know anything at all about the game, but gathered that the four kings should have been successful.

"Well! that is what gives me the sick," Sebastian had obviously renewed his acquaintanceship with American phraseology. "I started telling Hayling about it to-day; we lunched together. He says they are card-sharpers, known to the police, known to everybody. Captain Villiers, Major Elers, they call themselves; there is a regular gang of them."

"And the red-haired lady?"

"God knows," he stretched himself, and yawned. "What I can't get over is having been such a mug. They must have stacked the cards, of course."

She wanted to restore his belief in himself, to comfort him for having been cheated.

"You could not possibly have known. I do not understand how such a person could have got in to the dance. Several people I know attend it regularly; the American Ambassador is one of the patrons."

"The tickets are only ten bob, anybody can get in. The strange part is that she really is a nice little woman, and there is no doubt her husband was at Eton."

"You will not go there again, you will not pursue the acquaintance," she asked, anxiously.

"I am not so bally sure. Forewarned is forearmed, I shan't play cards there again, but she is rather an attractive little donah!"

This incident became one of many. Letters and telegrams came to the house. Sebastian seemed

to be in great, and ever greater, request amongst a whole section of people who were unknown to his mother. Out of a shifting kaleidoscope of names, and places, and personalities, one or two began to grow clear. Hayling, for instance, was brought home, apparently at his own request.

She found herself distrustful of him, and resented the familiarity of his manner. He was a partner in one of the leading firms in the paper trade. They had been doing, for many years, the bulk of the trade that Sebastian was keen on obtaining for Rendalls. Mr. Hayling dropped into confidential talk with Vanessa, the first evening he dined with them.

"Your son and I are great friends; I try to be of a little assistance to him now and again. I am so much older than he is."

"He has had the benefit of his father's experience," she answered, stiffly. She was up in arms at once at the note of patronage she detected, or suspected.

"Of course, but I wasn't alluding——"

"The pater only had experience of an out-of-date branch," Sebastian struck in, "hand-made has gone pop. No one uses it. Nobody cares for quality now, except half a dozen firms, that we have got stone cold, firms we have done business with for centuries. There isn't a living in it, not enough to persuade a bank clerk from his stool."

Hayling protested against such a sweeping statement, and argument ensued.

Mr. Hayling, Robert, or "Bob," as his friends called him, familiarly, was what is generally, known as a "man about town." His family were business people, originally quakers, and they had been rich for three generations. Bob had been to a public school, and graduated at Cambridge, taking a respectable second class. At twenty-two he

married a young woman he met in a tea-shop, and at twenty-three he had grown tired of her. Her early death left him free to indulge his tastes, which were eclectic, and untrammelled save by his own convenience. He was justified in representing himself as capable of benefiting Sebastian by his business experience, for he worked well in the City, in the intervals of his self indulgence in the West End. But there was an absence of moral consciousness about him that led one to doubt even his commercial integrity.

Vanessa did not like her son's friend, and found it difficult to understand the genesis of the intimacy, although the whole of that first evening, and for many months to follow, Bob Hayling devoted himself strenuously to the task of making himself as acceptable to the mother as he had to the son.

He was undeniably good-loking, in a grey-haired, exhausted way. There was no more colour in his face than in his hair, his complexion was grey, his face clean shaven, and all the lines exposed. His figure was good, and his height over six feet, he was undoubtedly what the majority of women would call "a fine man." He wore an eyeglass, on a *moire* silk ribbon, and dressed with extreme care. He pursued adventure, as other men pursue foxes, or kill game. It was the only sport he knew. Already past his fortieth year, he had grown perhaps a little languid in his pleasures. He sometimes thought, now, that there might be an attraction in domesticity, and one's own hearth. But he had been too long used to play the cuckoo for him to lightly contemplate building a nest. His particular charm, and what he considered the cause of his almost infallible success with women, was a confidential tone, and a caressing manner, He meant to have a "success" with Sebastian's mother, but it would seem that it was long in coming.

"You don't like Hayling, mater?" Sebastian said to her, at breakfast. "Now I wonder why? He is quite a good sort. It was his idea my bringing him home. He has asked me about it two or three times since that day when he first saw you in the City. You were not very civil to him last night. I can't think why."

"I thought I was quite civil, I tried to be, but I admit he did not impress me favourably."

"His manners are good?"

"Y-e-es, perhaps. But there seems to be rather too much of them."

"He puts things in my way."

"That is what I fear——"

The boy reddened.

"Of course you know what I mean," he interrupted, shortly, "in the City. He took a stack of stuff off my hands when I collared that contract from Pierce's, and then couldn't place it. You're prejudiced against him, because he is in trade."

"Or because he introduces you to undesirable people at American balls!"

Nevertheless, and without her being able to avoid, or perhaps to justify, her desire to avoid, him, Hayling became a frequenter of the Harley Street house; Sebastian brought him home to dinner two or three times a week. It seemed, that, in all the dissipations in which Sebastian took part, Hayling was an active, or passive, participant. And he insisted on being confidential with Vanessa, sometimes vexing her by a knowledge of the boy's doings, by being more completely in his confidence than she, sometimes reassuring her to the impression that he was genuinely fond of the boy, and anxious to pilot him safely through a difficult tide.

But she would not receive the other impression he wished to convey, that it was his interest in her that prompted, or deepened, his interest in Sebastian.

Bob Hayling was more or less a professional lover, with conventional compliments and *clichés*. Sometimes he irritated Vanessa, and often he bored her. Eventually she came to look upon him as a mere material, and the interest, she then extended to him, was used to elicit stock phrases of which she kept notes.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME few weeks after the poker incident, Vanessa became aware that a new interest, or absorption, held Sebastian's leisure hours. She had a prevision of fresh trouble. She still refrained from questioning him, but his ingenuousness gave her the clue to an acquaintance that, the moment they touched upon the subject, he admitted he found extraordinarily exciting. There was mystery in it, and romance. It was not his heart that was involved, it was his imagination.

"You remember, mater, lending me the Victoria for a couple of hours last Thursday? I meant to go up to the Albert Hall to see about those tickets for you. But just as I got half way through the park; it was by the water, before we got to the gate; a lady bowed to me, a ripping looking woman. She was in a very smart turn out, a fine pair of bays, quite the right thing in liveries, and cockade, and the rest of it. I returned the bow, although I did not know her from Adam. I wanted to have another look, so I told John to turn. We got stopped by the traffic, side by side. She had bowed to me, so I didn't see any harm in smiling at her. Then she leaned forward, and said:

"'It is a long time since we have met. I do not believe you even recognised me at first?'

"I had never set eyes on the woman before. So I protested that I could not possibly have forgotten her, that I remembered her perfectly."

"'How long are we going to be held up here?' she asked. I told her I 'couldn't think.' 'Well, it seems absurd we should be in two carriages, when we could talk so much better in one,' she answered. And it did not take me long to be sitting beside her, talking as if we had known each other all our lives."

He went on to say that her conversation was most interesting, and it was obvious she moved in select circles. For she knew, and bowed, to many people, and she spoke familiarly of the royalties, calling them by their Christian names. She accepted an invitation, which she prompted Sebastian to issue, that they should dine together. She became suddenly doubtful, however, if the proprieties were being observed, and she tried to "cry off." Sebastian admitted that he was insistent, and pleaded their old acquaintanceship! And that presently the plea prevailed.

Vanessa heard this part of the story from Sebastian. He related incidents of the dinner and evening, how the waiter called his guest "your ladyship," and how she rebuked his indiscretion!

Sebastian was really ingenuous, at twenty-one illusion had not yet vanished, and he was imaginative by inheritance.

After the dinner, he had seen the woman home to a luxurious flat in St. James's, where two men-servants, and a French maid, completed the impression she conveyed. He thought now that, either a fancied resemblance to some one else, or his own *beaux yeux*, had attracted to him one of the leaders of society! He respected her anonymity, accepting a *nom de guerre* she gave, but which she owned was not her own.

She admitted, too, it appeared, that she found his society attractive, and deplored that she was not free to indulge herself in it openly.

The wildest conjectures floated in the liquidity

of Sebastian's mind. He conferred peerages upon her, sometimes even crediting her with royal blood.

Before he was disillusioned, however, he became, for some reason or another, firmly convinced that she was a very well-known lady, not of the blood royal, but "daughter of a hundred earls," and recently involved in a complicated divorce suit, from which she had emerged with sufficient reputation to make it possible that the co-respondent should deem it his duty to marry her!

Sebastian took the theme of his mother's last book for his inspiration. If he were right in his identification, then she was living in that strange period "Between the Nisi and the Absolute." Sebastian thought it was possible her lover was abroad. He did not find it strange that she should wish to give him her unoccupied hours, nor hesitate to avail himself of them.

At the beginning of this entanglement, Sebastian voiced to Vanessa his interest, doubts, and amazing, imaginative conclusions. As his interest deepened, and the toils gathered round him, Bob Hayling dropped her a hint or two. By the time the boy's infatuation was patent to all London, Vanessa was conscious of a change in his manner toward her. It was not that he was a less good son, but her instinct taught her that she was somewhat of a tie to him, that she had better not claim his time, that what had been pleasure, the intercourse between them, and familiar talk, was now an irksome duty. His mind was elsewhere, and it was difficult for him to conceal it. Even Bob was no longer fully in his confidence:

"I suspect what is going on, but I can't make him talk about it," he admitted to Vanessa. "Don't allow yourself to be unhappy about it. I don't suppose there is going to be trouble, although this

secrecy is a bad sign. Would you like me to investigate?"

"I should not like to pry upon him," she hesitated.

Again she was distracted by fears. If she, too, had not been full of false theory, and impossible councils of perfection, it would have been easier to meet the situation. As it was, she hesitated, and suffered.

But Bob, without a commission, urged by his own curiosity, took the matter up, and soon found the way to meet Sebastian's new reticence.

"You are such a beastly cynic," the boy admitted, "I don't want to have her picked to pieces."

"Well, you need not keep her such a secret, you might introduce me, for instance."

"I haven't the privilege. I am not sure she would like it."

"You see her nearly every day?" he asked curiously.

"It is not a bit what you think. She is going through a difficult time."

"Costing you something?" he asked, brutally.

"There you go. I swear the mater is right, there is something inherently coarse about you."

"Did your mother say that?" he asked, with a slow flush. Sebastian was sorry he had said it. For Bob changed colour under his grey skin. He scored it up against Vanessa, the total of these scores was getting high.

"Why do you ask me if she was costing me anything? It shows such a beastly mind."

"You are a lucky fellow, it doesn't matter to you what you spend on women," Bob sighed. It was his method to endow Sebastian with supposititious wealth, to credit him with a great, and growing business, to envy his luck generally. The boy liked this, it added to his importance.

"You know, Bob," he went on, reluctantly, he

did not want to talk of that which obsessed him, but they were lunching together in the City, and the occasion lent itself to philosophy, "that is a rotten phrase of yours, 'spending money on women!' We spend it with women, because we cannot spend it without them. There is not much fun having the best dinner in the world, if we dine by ourselves, is there? I don't think we are doing women a favour by taking them out, they are doing us one, by coming."

"She has taught you a lot, eh!"

"Oh! Go to hell!"

Sebastian pushed his chair back, and rose impatiently.

He was dwelling in a region of romance. But very close to his new domain there might be ugly realism and slumland. He did not want to see them. Bob was spectroscopic.

It was a mood, difficult, of course, or impossible, of continuance. He was young, idealistic, sentimental. But he was no fool. The woman began to make pulls on his credulity, and, incidentally, on his purse. Then her conduct varied from that of a princess in disguise, to that of Laïs. To be her protector appealed to his chivalry; to be her lover would have spoiled everything that had appealed to him. She had met nothing as fine as Sebastian and she did not understand the way to keep him. The illusion would have survived the arrears of rent at the flat, the stories of the large sum of money that had been expected, but had failed to come; he could even have commiserated the moments when he found her the worse for drink. Had not her husband divorced her, her lover left her? Was she not alone in the world, save for him? But some of the scales fell from his eyes when she would have paid his liberality with caresses. She did not understand his flush to be of repulsion, his

rejection to be distaste. She rallied him on his innocency, and completed the disenchantment. But unfortunately, not sufficiently soon, nor definitely. The matter was brought to a climax after one desperate night when Vanessa lay awake until the dawn, listening for the boy's footsteps. He came in toward four; she heard him moving about, and restless. Neither of them had slept, it appeared, and even before breakfast he knocked at the door.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "Send Marie away, do your own hair."

"Must I? I do it so badly," she answered, nervously; her bad night had demoralised her, and she was fearful of what she would hear.

"You had better know before you get the papers. I got into a row last night. . . ."

"The papers?"

"You know about the Princess?" Vanessa had given her that name when, in the early days of his confidences, Sebastian had been so convinced of blood royal in the veins of his incognito. "I was there last night, rather late. She had been bothered; she was out of sorts, and begged me not to go, she was fearfully nervous." He did not say that she had been drinking all day, but in any case it appeared she had dreaded her own company.

It was a sordid, ugly, story that came out. The boy was distressed, and worried, yet even in the morning light he did not see how he could have acted differently.

A man had demanded admittance to the flat at one in the morning. The Princess had appealed to Sebastian for protection, she had represented her untoward visitor as an insistent creditor! The boy had taken a high hand, and ordered the man out. He retorted with unpardonable words; he was obviously drunk, and Sebastian had knocked him down. There was a scrimmage, a great deal of unnecessary

noise, and occupants of the other flats had sent the night porter to investigate the cause of the tumult. The upshot was that the police were called in. The man was charged with "breaking and entering;" and he brought a counter charge of assault against Sebastian. The whole degrading business must be threshed out this morning, at eleven o'clock, in the Marylebone Street Police Court.

Of course, both mother and son took an exaggerated view of the incident. In the first flush of it, Vanessa thought she could never hold up her head again among the friends to whom she had so often spoken of Sebastian, who knew how she regarded him; she was shamed, humiliated. Sebastian himself, fluctuated, uncertainly, between the doubt whether he would be considered by his City friends and clients as a hero, or merely as a brawler!

"I don't see what else I could have done," he repeated. "I don't think it will do me any harm in business. I shall 'phone Bob to come and see me through. The man came there to make a row, and she asked me to get rid of him. What would you have had me do?"

What Vanessa would have really liked was that he should avoid the company of bad women. But it had seemed to him part of the necessary equipment of life. And to this view Bob Hayling persuaded him, and almost succeeded in persuading her, when he arrived, hot foot, in time to accompany Sebastian to the police station. He was really helpful and alive to the situation. He made Sebastian send for a lawyer, and whilst he was out of the room, telephoning to the one Bob recommended, Bob put the situation tersely before Vanessa:

"He must sow his wild oats. Of course I didn't know it was the 'Princess of Pilsenstein' who had got hold of him, or I might have stopped it," he said. "I know all about it now. The Nawaab

brought her out about fifteen years ago, spending money on her like water. When his claim on the Government was got rid of, and he was left with two thousand a year, and a recommendation to go back to Nepaul, she took up with Oldcastle, the eldest son of the Duke of Thanet. He is supposed to have said to her, 'I can't give you wonderful gems like the Nawaab,' and she to have replied, coolly, 'Don't worry, I'll rough it on the Thanet diamonds.' There are any number of stories about her, more or less true. She is a wonderful-looking woman for her age, I'm not surprised she took in Sebastian."

Bob said there would be no doubt now about freeing Sebastian from the entanglement without any further damage. The police would have her *dossier*, he would learn all that was necessary.

"But what will happen?"

"Prosecutor and defendant will both be bound over. You will be surprised to find how quickly the magistrate will understand what is behind the case."

"And will it be in all the papers?"

"I should think so. But there is nothing much in it."

"We have different points of view."

Bob was putting her under an obligation to him, but she could not be grateful. It seemed to her that his whole perspective was awry.

"You can't expect a young fellow to sit at home, evening after evening, twiddling his thumbs."

"We won't discuss ethics." She had poured Mr. Hayling out a cup of coffee. He had hurried out, without breakfast, in response to Sebastian's hasty summons. But now she rose to leave him. He put his cup down. He intercepted her at the door.

"Just wait one minute."

She had no choice, for he had not opened the door for her, only guarded it. "You've set yourself against me. You think I've a bad influence on Sebastian. But you are wrong. I'd do anything for him, or for you. I want you to like me."

"Before he knew you, Sebastian was all and more than a boy should be," she answered, deliberately.

"He wasn't twenty-one, he hadn't begun to live. Look facts in the face. All young fellows have to pass this stage. Sebastian is going through all right, he won't come a mucker, I promise you that. His head is screwed on the right way, he doesn't care for drink, he is no gambler. I'll see no one gets right hold of him, if you'll only trust me."

He wanted to make love to her, it had gone home to him that she found him coarse. Her aloofness was unbearable to him.

"Leave the boy alone a minute. Let us talk of ourselves. You've never given me a chance." He did the wrong thing, the inevitably wrong thing, he tried to prevent her going, to keep the door against her. "Give me a chance."

"Let me pass, please," she said, inconsiderately, she was in no mood to be tolerant this morning, nor careful of her words.

"I'm not to have a hearing?"

"You are to open the door. I want to go out."

"You would rather not have me as a friend?"

"It is absolutely indifferent to me."

She was so distracted by Sebastian's position that she could not conciliate, nor parley. The sordid vulgarity of the police court proceedings assumed quite an exaggerated importance in her eyes.

Afterwards her social conscience told her she had been rude. It was not necessary for Sebastian to rub it in, as he did, frankly, a few days later. He had only heard Mr. Hayling's version, she told him.

But what other could she give? A woman of sensitive feeling cannot tell her son that she has had to rebuff a gallantry.

The *séance* at the police station, as Bob had foretold, ended in both combatants being bound over to keep the peace. It was made quite clear that the intruder had at least an equal right with the boy to consider himself a welcome visitor at the St. James's Place flat.

It is almost impossible to overestimate, perhaps, for any one but his mother, to understand, how Sebastian suffered, when the region of romance in which he had dwelt these weeks was suddenly invaded and devastated by an old, disorderly population. And for the moment, there was no romance nor poetry left in the world for him, the effluvia of dead and rotting things was in his nostrils.

The crisis was spiritual as well as mortal. He accused himself of having neglected his duties to his mother, and to both names he bore. If, in truth, he had not sinned, as, in light acceptance and scoffing, sin was attributed to him, he knew he had dwelt in evils places. The depths of him shrank from what he had seen, and the surfaces suffered from what people might be saying of him. He was shaken as if disaster had overtaken him, he looked wan, and too fine drawn. He could not let Vanessa help him, nor touch his open wounds. He worked harder than ever in the City, the evenings were given over to misanthropy.

CHAPTER XIX

JOE WALLINGFORD, who had never taken her letter rejecting his offer of marriage as final, and would never so take it, failed to understand what was troubling Vanessa.

He was, of course, often in London, pursuing his suit in his own leisurely, but definite way, making Vanessa write articles for him, interest herself in his enterprises, urge him to greater seriousness in his political aspirations, or movements. It was Sebastian who stood between him and his desires, he knew that.

It could not escape him, either, that not only the mother, but the son, now looked depressed, and out of tune. Naturally, a man of his calibre, even had he known of it, would not have taken the Pilsenstein incident very seriously. It was to business, therefore, that Joe attributed the causes of the heaviness in the Harley Street atmosphere.

He spent a whole evening trying to draw the boy out. Sebastian, weary of introspection and self-reproach, gladly talked of new engines, and raw material. Joe was well up in the various pulps, and always interested in machinery. Sebastian told Vanessa afterwards that he "tapped the magnate's brain." If that were so, there is no doubt Joe, quite consciously, allowed the spigot to remain in, and dropped his valuable comment.

"We had quite a good evening, didn't we?" Sebastian said to Vanessa, lingering in the drawing-

room after Joe's departure, more like his old self than she had seen him for some time.

"You know, mater, he could be quite useful to me, I get things out of him as it is, he is up to a lot of business dodges. He likes talking to me, too. You see, I have got all the up-to-date stuff at my fingers' ends. I did not waste my time abroad. He seemed to think very well of my new treatment of that corn-stalk pulp. I am going to produce paper, as thick as vellum, and as light as tissue, see if I don't."

Sebastian had great recuperative powers, and there was no doubt Joe's visit had done him good.

Joe stayed in town to see the new buildings, and Sebastian brought him back the next evening to tell Vanessa how much he had been struck with what he had seen. The walls were up, and much of the machinery in place. The old mill, with its limited water-power, one vat, and small accommodation, was still turning out the Rendall specialities. The old foreman, and three other workmen, were still leisurely dipping their wire frames into the bluish mixture, stagnant in the receptacle that looked like a horse trough. Apprentices were making the paper, sheet by sheet, laying it between felt, or blanket, examining each piece as if time had been no object. Joe had never seen paper made in this way, and it had great interest for him. But Sebastian was full of the new machinery, and was eager to confide a secret that he half felt he should conceal. Joe understood that, and he put cautious questions. Sebastian's own questions, however, were more illuminative than his answers. He was curious about the books Joe published, the weight and size of them, the paper he used, and where he bought it.

Joe knew Sebastian wanted an order from him. He was really ngenuous in his business methods.

Joe wondered if, by any chance, by any possible chance, Vanessa was worrying at the possibility of his becoming entangled in Sebastian's business schemes, or being asked to help him. Joe was very cautious, and waiting his time. He would not expedite the moment when Sebastian might ask him for help. Only Vanessa must not be worried nor allowed to fear or fret.

Yet it seemed he was guessing wrongly; for Sebastian asked nothing, wanted nothing, but praise and appreciation. Both of these Joe could give freely.

Stella, although she did not like him, had become in a measure reconciled to Joe Wallingford since David's death. She had trafficked in love, and knew its values. Joe might stand in the background of Vanessa's life, doing little kindnesses for her, adding something to it, admiring, or worshipping, her from the distance. So long as he did not attempt to get close, Stella would tolerate him there. But in speaking of him to Vanessa she was for ever attempting to widen the distance, or keep it impregnable, by contemptuous word, or speech. She made it ever obvious that she looked down upon him, and thought him ignorant, bucolic, unworthy.

But Vanessa had no thought of marrying Joe Wallingford. Sebastian held her thoughts ever more securely. And her friends would not let her off the discussion of his latest escapade.

Lady de Cliffe spent a long afternoon in Harley Street, and in the intervals of admiring the china, belittling the eighteenth-century prints, and appraising the jade, she found time to congratulate Vanessa, on what she was pleased to call, her son's *matinée* at the police station.

"He had a splendid house, I hear, and *such* good notices. It was really clever of him to be taken in

by the Princess of Pilsenstein, so beautifully ingenuous. You must make him come and see me, I want to hear all about it. I wonder what he will do next? You are so unlike other people, you and your son. I was afraid he was going to be quite good, and dull. That terrible woman, Mrs. St. Maur, told me he had engaged himself to his cousin's governess, that he meant to marry her. Ridiculous! I said it was ridiculous! He is much too attractive to marry. But I shouldn't be surprised if he had a short attack of virtue. The Princess must have been an exhausting experience!"

And Lord Saighton told Stella, carelessly:

"That boy of your sister's wants looking after. He has made a confounded young ass of himself with the Pilsenstein; it's a pity his father died so early. A boy could not have gone far wrong with a man like David Rendall at the back of him."

However carefully Stella conveyed the gist of this to Vanessa, it was hard to bear.

Mrs. St. Maur, too, had an insatiable curiosity, and Hilary St. Maur an inherent tactlessness. Vanessa could not deny herself to callers. She had to meet the situation the proceedings at the police court revealed.

Mrs. St. Maur asked if Sebastian were going to marry the Princess! She repeated anecdotes about her. She was, perhaps, a little spiteful, at seeing Viola's matrimonial chances imperilled. Hilary St. Maur said he was glad to say that their Reggie did not care about women! Vanessa was tempted to retort that perhaps that was fortunate.

To Sebastian, reaction came intermittently. He refused all invitations, he would not go out any more of an evening. Like Reggie St. Maur, he, too, forswore women. He read a great deal, theology held him for the moment, but that, too, soon palled.

A casual remark from Vanessa, that whenever

things went awry with her, she always found peace in the world of creative fiction, or in composing verse, started him on a new tack. There was no doubt he had as much talent as his mother or more. She said so herself. Then why should he not devote his evenings to literary pursuits? There was no vital incompatibility between a paper merchant and a poet. He had always been good at verses, rhythm presented no difficulties to him at any time.

The very moment the idea came to him he put it into execution; although it was eleven o'clock at night, and before the suggestion had been made he was contemplating bed.

He boasted to his mother, in the morning, that he had thought of a subject, began, finished and polished it off, in less than three-quarters of an hour!

"You know, mater," he said, "that is almost a record. It was under the forty-seven minutes by the pater's watch, and you know how he always swore by that. It just came to me, as fast as I could write it. What does one get for a sonnet? A tenner, or fiver? Take it at the lowest figure, and let us reckon it at an hour, it means forty pounds a day. You have never made anything like that, have you?"

She admitted that she never had.

The Sebastian who spent the next few evenings at the writing-table in the corner of the drawing-room was still a boy. This quality of youth was the deodoriser which purified him so quickly of the past. Vanessa took pains to conceal from him that the quality of literary work counts more highly than the speed at which it is produced.

Sebastian gave her a rhymed version of the correspondence column of a lady's paper, several short stories, and the first chapter of his auto-

biography, all within a fortnight. With infinite difficulty Vanessa succeeded in placing one of the short stories. It had been necessary to improve the literary form, and that had been a labour of love for her. But Sebastian upbraided her:

"I consider you've spoilt it. I suppose that is why the others were not snapped up. You see, mater, your style and mine are so different. You labour your stories, and I just dash off mine. It's Impressionism, that is my school. If you do not mind, for the future, when I give you my things to sell, I would rather not have a word altered."

Sebastian bore failure badly. And he was too sharp for Vanessa to be able to conceal from him that his output was not marketable.

He conceived a bad opinion of editors, and a worse one of literary agents. He discovered the incompetency of both:

"You have only got to give either of them something a little out of the way, something with a dash of originality about it, for them to jib at it altogether," he complained. "You know, yourself, that telephone story of mine, when the line got entangled, and the Johnny found himself switched on to Hell, talking to a woman he had known when she was alive, was absolutely new. You laughed like anything, when I read it you."

She laughed again.

"But I begged you not to send it to *The Evangelist!*"

"That is where you are all such a narrow-minded lot, all you literary people. It may have been lurid, but it was absolutely moral."

Sebastian said he should not write any more, until literature was on a very different footing in England. He lost spirits over it; business, too, seemed trying him beyond his strength, or perhaps it was the spring weather. Anyway, Vanessa

knew him restless and feverish at nights, languid in the mornings, exhausted in the evenings, and took quick alarm. She sent for Dr. Gifford, for Sebastian acknowledged that his intellectual and physical vigour were both at ebb tide. With Dr. Gifford he played the tired *roué :*

" I've gone the pace too fast. I've burned the candle at both ends. After all, doctor, it isn't every fellow under two-and-twenty who has seen and done as much as I have."

He went over his Continental and American experiences, he said he had built up a big business, and he would have boasted, had not something quizzical in the doctor's eyes restrained him, of how wide and deep was his knowledge of human frailty.

It was certain that all this vaunted strenuousness of life and labour, had a temporary constitutional effect. Dr. Gifford, with David in his mind, was peremptory in ordering change of air and scene, complete rest, a strict *régime*, and the simple life.

Sebastian said, flatly, he would not stir ; his hands were full in the City, he was in no mood for a holiday, he would stay where he was, but he did not mind swallowing the beastly maltine. Sebastian was rather proud of his breakdown in health, and made the most of it.

" I have lost nearly seven pounds," he told Bice, " I wouldn't let the mater know for the world. I never sleep the night through, my cough keeps me awake. I suppose it's the beginning of the end. I don't care, I've had a good time. It's hard luck on the mater, but as far as I am concerned, what is the odds ? "

Bice could not bear it, simply could not bear that Sebastian should pine away. He might think it was consumption, she knew it was love ! She put her pride in her pocket, she could not believe that

Pleasey would hold out if she knew how it was with him. Generous and unselfish herself, she honestly believed that Pleasey had given Sebastian up because she deemed it best for him ; because of the disparity of years, and the difference in position. She had not been in the secret of their final parting, but she saw its effect on Sebastian, and thought Pleasey, too, might be unhappy.

She went by train to Wimbledon, she walked to Cleeve Row, a mean street of lodging houses. The shabby, sordid poverty did not repel her, as later on, it repelled Vanessa. She was full of her mission, she thought of nothing else.

And Pleasey was glad to see her. There was no doubt Pleasey was glad. She had just had her head washed, all her fair hair was hanging over her shoulders, and she sat before the fire drying it. She was all alone, her mother had gone out with Zuley ; her father was away. Pleasey was wavering now in her belief at her wisdom in having left Weymouth Street. Certainly when Mr. Hayling asked her to drive or dine with him, she was free to go. She had had some wonderful hours. But Mr. Hayling was intermittent in his attentions, indefinite in his love-making, there was often a long hiatus between his visits. And in all the intervals there was the grinding perpetual poverty, the humiliations at the hands of the exacting landlady. She was exacting in requiring her rent to be paid punctually, and both Pleasey and her parents resented this attitude of hers ! Pleasey had to listen to her mother's plaint at the poor response to Ambrose Pleyden-Carr's begging letters ; stimulants were essential to solace the disappointments. Always there were Zuley's vagaries to be kept under control. Zuley was not sufficiently imbecile to be locked up, nor sufficiently normal to be left unguarded. They were all four, shiftless, idle, unpractical people.

Pleasey's care for her appearance was a saving grace; the others were self-neglectful, slovenly.

Bice saw nothing, stopped to see nothing; she was full of her subject.

"I know you only left him because you thought it was for his good; you will have to come back. He is going into a decline, nobody but me knows what is really the matter with him, and the only thing that can save him."

"Does he know you have come to me? Are you sure he cares about me still? What about that story I read in the paper? I thought he had forgotten poor me."

"He never cared about anybody else, the Princess was nothing to him; it was only because she was lonely, and in trouble, that he spent so much time with her. He was just good to her, nothing else, he was always like that."

"But what am I to do, if he did not ask you to come to me, nor say anything?"

"*I* know; you must believe I know my own cousin. He is just pining after you, that is what he is doing, pining."

Pleasey was only half reluctant to be persuaded Sebastian still idolised her. She had not been touched by it, but she realised that he was unlike any other boy, or man, whom she had met. Mr. Hayling suited her better. But then Mr. Hayling was so indefinite, Bice was certain to carry her point with Pleasey, for she was deeply in earnest. She would have shed her own heart's blood for Sebastian; but it was Pleasey, alone, who could cure him.

"I can't come back with you to-night, it is impossible. I must wait until mother comes home. And then my hair is not dry, it takes such a long time to dry," protested Pleasey, irresolutely.

"But I must take back a message."

"Tell him I am sorry to hear he is ill."

"Give me a note for him."

"Shall I?"

Pleasey was uncertain, but Bice had no uncertainty, she found pencil and paper, she stood over her until it was done. Pleasey would promise nothing, bind herself to nothing. But Bice was sure she had been interested, she asked so many questions, she *almost* promised she would come back to Weymouth Street, temporarily, at least. She would spend a few days there, to-morrow, next day, next week, some time.

Pleasey hesitated, temporised. But Bice went back, happy in the note she carried for Sebastian, convinced that it would benefit his health.

Pleasey, whose hair had been washed, and was presently waved, for the delectation of Mr. Robert Hayling, was not disappointed in her expectation of seeing him. For what else had she manœuvred that her mother should be absent all these hours?

He drove up to the door, in his forty horse-power Panhard, and disentangled his length from the car, slowly, and to the entertainment of the whole mean street. His big coat became him, it was very well cut, and hung loose and wide, straight from his shoulders; he wore no unsightly goggles.

"Miss Pleyden-Carr at home?" he asked the little maid-servant.

She heard it across the narrow passage, in the stuffy little parlour; she thrilled at the sound of his voice, as she would never thrill for Sebastian.

Now he was in the room, her colour rose, her pulses bounded. His greeting may have lacked respect. Who wants respect? Why should he not kiss her, he had done so before?

"Come out for a drive? I am in the big car, it's a fine evening, and we can go to Hampton Court, dine at the Mitre, or push on to Skindles, we could do Maidenhead in an hour, and it isn't

seven yet. Everybody out? how did you manage it? Don't keep me waiting, I haven't stopped the car, I don't want the petrol to run out half way."

"I won't be a minute."

But she was. Pleasey must cover the light hair with a bonnet, or hood; the lace inside, the very latest fashion, borrowed from the eighteenth century, framed her small face. She had on a big coat Bob had given her in the autumn, for just such excursions as these.

"What a devil of a time you've been. Another two minutes, and I should have started without you. I am going to drive, and you can sit beside me. The boy will go inside. Coming back, I'll let him take the wheel."

Pleasey's imagination could picture that drive back, in the dark. Bob would be kind to her, very kind. She had another little shudder-sweet thrill, of expectation, perhaps of remembrance; she was sure he was fond of her.

He talked of the car all the way down. At dinner he made her drink more champagne than was good for her. He was quite as kind as she anticipated, on the way home, kinder even. She had no secrets from Bob, she told him all about Bice's visit, and that Sebastian had broken down in health. He said she was very sweet, and he was not a bit surprised to hear that Sebastian had been in love with her. He said Sebastian was only a boy; he was a man, and knew a man's way of loving. And he taught her something of what he meant, in an after-dinner mood. She was an apt pupil, and it was not a first lesson.

She arrived home late, her lips very hot, her heart quite tempestuous, feeling all the emotion of which she was capable, very excited. She had quite forgotten her note to Sebastian.

But Bob Hayling had had too many after-dinner

moods, in his time, for this to have made any particular impression upon him. The only memory he had of it the next morning; beyond the vague one that Pleasey had been very responsive, and he was not quite sure that he would risk another similar evening; was the news she had told him of Sebastian Rendall's health.

Robert Hayling had taken his own way of meeting the competition that the boy's active business powers set going. His partner cursed the young jackanapes who cut prices, competed actively, and made them look to their supremacy in the trade. But Bob did no cursing, he thought Sebastian would soon tire of business. At twenty-one, pleasure comes before business, if one knew where to look for pleasure. That was the job Mr. Robert Hayling thought would suit him down to the ground, teaching young Rendall where to look for pleasure! But Sebastian had disappointed him, quite seriously disappointed him; he had been more active than ever in business lately; there was no doubt he was making himself felt. His partner could not speak of P. and A. Rendall without execration. If the boy continued to stand outside the "Association," to cut prices, and boast he was an "Independent," why then——Bob cut himself shaving in the mere contemplation of what might occur.

But Pleasey said the boy was ill, had developed a tendency to consumption, had been ordered to strike work. Quite a brilliant idea struck Mr. Hayling, as he completed his toilette. And he surveyed himself in the glass with satisfaction, notwithstanding that little cut. He *was* attractive to women, it was absurd of Sebastian's mother not to realise it.

He put on a frock-coat, and high hat, a grey tie that toned with his grey hair, and notwithstanding

the dissipated lines about his clean-shaven face, and his pallor, he thought he cut a good figure.

The morning he gave up to business. In the afternoon he would pay a visit to Harley Street. He saw Sebastian in his office, and made a suggestion to him. He told Joynson, casually, that he thought of taking a few weeks off, now, instead of in the summer.

"If that cursed young fool in Queen Victoria Street doesn't mend his ways, there will be no holiday for any of us," his partner growled in response.

"I thought of taking him with me," Bob answered, coolly.

"Do, and break his neck," was the rejoinder.

"I don't suppose there will be many of his plans I shan't know by the time we get back," Bob went on. He bantered the other;

"You go on under-cutting, and cursing. Perhaps it does you good, eases your congested liver. But that is not my method, and I bet you mine is the better. *Suaviter in modo*, that's the ticket. If I pull off my little scheme, we shall have the field to ourselves again in a few weeks. You can get that Carter contract through whilst I am away, I will give you the argument; and I should not be surprised if you got Sadler's, too, if you go the right way to work."

"At half the profit we used to make before David Rendall died, and the whole trade became disorganised!"

"How much of the money David Rendall left, do you suppose is in the business now?"

"How should I know?"

"You shouldn't. You should not know anything; as a matter of fact, you don't. But those new buildings must have run away with a pot of money."

"I know as well as you do that he is up to the hilt."

"Well, drive the hilt in whilst he is away. He

may drop a bit of money at Aix. Anyway I am going to teach him how to take the bank at baccarat. He will like to be the cynosure of all eyes, playing the millionaire."

But he counted his chickens prematurely.

Certainly the suggestion he had dropped to Sebastian was not unacceptable in Harley Street.

Sebastian had been ordered open air, cessation from work, change of scene and surroundings. Mr. Hayling, it appeared, had seen him that morning, and heard of the prescription. Well, he was just off on a motor tour, through France and Switzerland. He would not move in the matter without first hearing it was agreeable to Mrs. Rendall. Was it agreeable to her that Sebastian should accompany him, should be his guest for the tour?

It seemed as if a way was really opening out of the difficulty. For Sebastian came in before Bob left, languid, with that new little cough that he had developed, and that tried Vanessa so terribly. And Sebastian said he had changed his mind about going away. Perhaps Gifford was right; he did feel awfully run down, and a run across the Continent in the new car would suit him better than any other sort of holiday.

Vanessa said she must see if Dr. Gifford approved. But after Bob had left, with the understanding that he should have a definite answer to-morrow, she demurred a little at the obligation! Sebastian looked at it in quite a different light.

"There is no obligation. I am a linguist, and he is not, an experienced traveller, whilst he has hardly been further than Margate."

It seemed useless to argue, she had no legitimate excuse to urge. She did not like Robert Hayling, but then as Sebastian very pertinently put before her, it was a question of health. This holiday the boy would take, or none.

And Dr. Gifford was quite satisfied when his opinion was asked.

"There is nothing seriously the matter with the boy," he said, "he is as sound as a bell, organically. That cough you are fidgeting about is nervous. His mind has outstripped his growth, and he is a little too young for his responsibilities, a little too young to be quite so much his own master; that is all that's wrong. There is nothing better than motoring as a nerve tonic in such cases; let him go. Your mind can be quite easy. Why don't you send his cousin with him? She would look after him, and see he did not get fresh cold, or over-exert himself. And it would do her no harm to have a change. She hangs about her mother too much, leads altogether too confined a life."

If it were a conspiracy, everybody must have been in it. Stella would not allow Bice to join the expedition, if only Mr. Hayling and Sebastian were of the party. Pleasey seemed like an afterthought, but if Pleasey would accompany them, Stella's maternal solicitude would be satisfied.

Pleasey had written that little sympathetic note to Sebastian, and he had taken it very gratefully, as a great concession from her. Perhaps it made him think himself worse than he was, perhaps it had something to do with his sudden decision to obey orders, to knock off work. After all, there was one kind, sweet girl in the world! He kissed the note, he slept with it under his pillow. He did not tell his mother he had received it.

Then came Dr. Gifford's suggestion that Bice should accompany him and Bob. A hint was whispered to him, by Bice, that seemed too wonderful to be possible.

"Mummy won't let me go alone. She would let me go if I had a chaperone, if—if Pleasey would come with me."

"But she wouldn't—it isn't possible!"

"I'll make her," Bice promised confidently. There followed two or three days of great excitement, hope and fear, with the result that Pleasey, after all, proved persuadable. She had one short interview with Sebastian, which Bice engineered. She had rather been without it, she did not know what to say to him. But she bore herself well. He was very agitated, and found words with difficulty. She had nothing to say about her dismissal of him. They were going to be friends, nothing but friends, he must not agitate himself, she had heard he had been ill. Bice saw they were not interrupted too soon, but indeed they were both glad of interruption. Sebastian's heart was too full for words. Pleasey's too empty.

At first, when the plan of a bachelor trip was altered, and it was settled that Sebastian was not to be his guest, but one of a party, each paying their own expenses, Mr. Hayling had bucked, he had nearly thrown over the whole thing. He did not know Bice, and he was not prepared to spend a month with Pleasey. It would be a bore to drag two women about, it was not at all what he intended. He had meant to push through, as quickly as he could, to Aix-les-Bains, where baccarat and bad women might be relied upon to keep Sebastian from meddling with contracts, until the crucial moment had passed when Messrs. Carter, and Messrs. Sadler, made their arrangements for the year.

But Bob Hayling was only a lath and plaster Mephistopheles. Bice diverted half his intentions, and put his plot out of his head, when Sebastian had her down in the City to lunch, and began to discuss the route. She was full of the pleasures of the trip, grateful to Mr. Hayling for having made it possible, very attractive in her enthusiasm.

Bice was no longer abnormally small, although

she had not grown beyond five feet two. The whilom disorder of her curly head was reduced, now that she was grown up, to reasonable dimensions. Her skin was soft ivory, but the dark expressive eyes and long lashes, the red lips and fluctuating colour lit up its shadows. When she smiled, the lovely row of teeth, the air of animation, and one little dimple, made the face extraordinarily attractive. She was small, but all her proportions were perfect, from dainty feet to rounded waist.

Bob's tastes were eclectic, and before that lunch party had drawn to a close in the crowded City restaurant, he had forgotten he had ever doubted the charm of the arrangement that would give him two attractive girls to drive, and a new sensation to enjoy. Bice *was* a new sensation to Bob Hayling, younger, fresher, prettier than any one he had met for years.

"I am awfully surprised you think Bice so good-looking," Sebastian said. "Of course I am fond of her, we have always been great pals. But I never looked upon her as a pretty girl, there is nothing of her, and then she is so dark."

"Tastes differ." Bob laughed, he was quite content Sebastian should not admire his cousin. Bob was fresh from another amorous interview with Pleasey; he was glad there was something new in front of him. Adventure to the adventurous!

Stella and Vanessa, together at the door in Weymouth Street to give the motor party a send off, commended their children to Bob's care:

"I'll take care of them all," Bob said. "You won't know Sebastian when he comes back. He will weigh twelve stone, and be the colour of beetroot."

"Take care of my Mummy," were Bice's last words to her aunt.

"And you of my Sebastian," was Vanessa's reply.

But no one asked that Pleasey should be cared for. Sebastian silently vowed himself to it. If she would only let him! It had all begun over again with him, his heart leaped under his coat when he caught her eye. She was quite conscious of it, she was even glad that Mr. Hayling should see it.

CHAPTER XX

FOR once Vanessa was glad of Sebastian's absence. She needed a breathing space, she had been living in the boy's strenuous life, she had had no room for her own.

Neither during her husband's lifetime, nor since Sebastian had taken the reins, had Vanessa any personal acquaintance with the business in Queen Victoria Street, nor the Rendall Mills. She was the more surprised, therefore, when three weeks after the motor party had started, she received an urgent letter, sent by hand, asking her if she would see Mr Jones. She knew vaguely that Mr. Jones was head clerk to Sebastian, as he had been to his father. Mr. Jones had been over thirty years with the firm, she had heard that, and that he was one of the few who had survived the new *régime*. But she was astonished at his asking for an interview with her. Her mind leaped to a quick conclusion of illness, domestic trouble, or the inheritance of a fortune. It seemed incredible that he should apply to her on the affairs of the firm.

From the beginning the interview oppressed, and puzzled her.

Mr. Jones was an elderly man, unused to drawing-rooms, nervous, embarrassed, finding speech difficult. She endeavoured to set him at ease, but her social sense failed to respond to his particular needs; he declined tea, and would not part with his hat. She could not tell him how long Mr. Sebastian

intended to be away, nor exactly where he was. It had been understood between them that he was to be quite free, he would wire from time to time ; no news meant that he was all right.

But Mr. Jones, floundering in some technical phrases about "bills," was evidently seriously perturbed by this indefiniteness. Vanessa really tried to understand what he was endeavouring to convey to her ; but she had not the slightest notion what "discounting bills" might mean. If Rendalls had "drawn on" any one, or any one had "drawn on" Rendalls, it was equally enigmatic. And why the words "at sight," or "at sixty days" should be reiterated, and why Mr. Jones should attach so much importance to them, she had not the least idea.

She was very kind and reassuring ;

"Of course, if anything is owing, it must be paid," she said, peremptorily. There was no doubt about that. How it was to be paid, was another matter. Surely there was money in the bank ; there was always money in the bank.

"Have you not the power to sign ? Did Mr. Sebastian forget to leave you a cheque ? If you will tell me the amount, I can let you have it from my private account, until he returns. Will that do ? Is that what you want ? "

"There are bills of lading, and the dock charges. Mr. Sebastian has a large consignment of——"

"Really, Mr. Jones, you must not give me detail, I understand nothing whatever about business. What is the amount you are short ? For what do you want me to draw a cheque ? "

But it was impossible to get Mr. Jones to answer a simple question. He would explain, and be apologetic, and beg her to look into matters for herself. He succeeded in making her slightly uncomfortable. And when at last he named a

sum that would " tide them over " until Mr. Sebastian returned, she was more than uncomfortable, she was almost alarmed ; she had no such amount lying to her credit. But debt was impossible, of course.

Mr. Jones ventured to suggest " securities." It was he who explained to her that these might be available.

She was a very clever woman, even practical, but she had no experience in money matters, they had not interested her.

" If you will tell me what you want me to do," was her final summary, " I will do it. Must I see a lawyer, or what ? Of course I have securities, my father's estate. I believe that they are at my bankers, I am not quite sure. Is there any immediate hurry ? "

She must ask some one else. Mr. Jones was much too flurried, and uncertain, to be of any use to her, it was she who reassured him. Whatever money was wanted, would, of course, be found. He would hear from Mr. Sebastian in a day or two, without doubt ; in the meantime she would see her lawyer, or her bank manager.

She sent him away considerably relieved. He did not know her resources, but, at least, he had her word that the six thousand pounds that was required on the eighth, would be there. He was not very resourceful,. Rendalls had not had to *finesse* in finance in the days when he was growing up in their employ. " Financing " spelt ruin to him, the boy had already left the old clerk far behind in his way of running the business. Sebastian was altogether modern, and full of expedients. But he ought to have realised that his subordinates were none of them trained to take his place.

Vanessa did the only thing that quickly occurred to her. She drove to her bank, and asked to see

the manager. He was very courteous, very courteous indeed, but grave when he heard the amount she required. Of course there was no difficulty about it. He sent for the securities book. She had stock against her name amounting to considerably more, to twelve or fourteen thousand pounds, in fact. And six or eight hundred pounds on her current account. They would advance her the amount, but. . . .

There were a great many bewildering "buts." And even although she disregarded them, insisting on her point that she must have the money at once, signing all that was required of her, and urging expedition, she was nevertheless not thoroughly easy in her mind.

She sent Mr. Jones the cheque she had promised him, by the date he had named; *his* mind was relieved. Hers, she thought, would be better for a little talk with a business man. She was sure she could learn the language Mr. Jones had talked, penetrate its mysteries; she only wanted a teacher.

There was Joe Wallingford. He was really the only business man she knew well. All her other friends were literary, or artistic.

She did not accuse herself of disingenuousness when she wrote to Joe Wallingford, asking him to come to her when he was next in town.

She was still satisfied that she had no *arrière pensée*, that there was no danger in the position, when already the next day he was in the drawing-room.

She could not have imagined she would be so glad to see him. It was water after long drought to talk of anything but Sebastian. She forgot why she had sent for him, and of what she wanted to talk. For, at once, they were on the easy terms of intimacy and companionship. The recess was over, and Joe told her he intended to remain in London

for the present.' He had used the time well whilst Parliament had been sitting.

"I have noted that. You have drifted so gradually from free trade to colonial preference, and from colonial preference to a differential tariff, that your readers are hardly yet aware that your port is Protection!"

He said her articles had been of value, he wished she had written more. There were journalistic differences to decide.

"And you—you look better than when I was here last. And the boy? Where is he?"

He heard about the breakdown in health, and the motor tour.

Then she said:

"Which reminds me why I wrote you. I want a lesson, I want to know what bills of exchange are, and what happens when you do not pay them. I want to learn something about discounting. Sebastian is away, and his head clerk seems singularly incompetent, he came to me for advice, or help, and I felt like a fool."

"So you sent for me to help you?"

He came a few paces nearer to her. In his eyes was that amazing consciousness of her that she had never seen save in his. Looking at him, at the big powerful head, and the consciousness in his eyes, a little rush of feeling came over her, whether it were gratitude, or personal interest, or something less definite than either, it was amazingly new to her.

"Will you?" she asked him, "will you help me?"

"You don't suppose I ever looked upon your letter as final?"

She waived that on one side. If her colour rose a little, she could not help it.

"I want to ask you about business, business generally, its intricacies, its difficulties."

"A dull subject."

"Sebastian ought not, perhaps, to have had the whole burden of it! I thought it was simple, now it appears complicated, almost impossible. You cannot sympathise intelligently with a man's daily work, if you are as ignorant as I am of its detail. I am annoyed now that I have shut it all out, listened with less than half an ear."

"That gift of sympathy you have——"

"Don't please, talk about me."

"Well, not at the moment. I'll wait, I don't care how long I wait. You'll have to let me talk about you some day. You'll not stand out against me for ever."

"I really want to speak about Rendalls."

"You shall." He sat down beside her on the sofa. "Go on. What has roused your interest? Anything wrong at the mills?"

She told him of the interview with Mr. Jones, relating it humorously, but he listened gravely. Something he had suspected, perhaps hoped. He did not let her see he regarded the matter at all seriously. He explained bills of exchange, and bills of lading, the difference between "sight," and "three months." He liked teaching her, liked sitting with her, noting her responsive intelligence, noting, too, the luxuriance of her dark hair, the softness of her thin lips, the entire desirability of her for him. There was no other woman to whom he cared to talk, he liked the sound of her voice, it was cultured, musical, unlike those North Country voices to which all his life he had been used.

"Mr. Jones was incoherent, and involved. He said some bills were falling due on the eighth. It seems, or so I took it, people who owed us money were asking for an extension of time; yet bills we had accepted for large amounts had to be met. I told him, of course, that whether we were paid or not, he must not get into debt."

Joe's grey eyes opened at this.

"But credit is the very soul of business! What did he say when you told him he must not get into debt?"

"He was very stupid, and looked as if he thought I did not know what I was talking about. I suppose, as a rule, men who spend their lives in money-getting *are* stupid?"

"Counting me?"

She smiled at him:

"Are newspaper proprietors who represent their county in Parliament supposed to be business men?"

"Does Eton turn them out?"

"Sebastian is absolutely wrapt up in Rendalls. He talks to me about the paper trade by the hour together. Have you seen this new 'feather weight,' as he calls it, the light paper he is producing?"

"A sample was shown to me."

"It is his own invention, a new material, and a new treatment. He says it has cost him thousands to produce and perfect it, in machinery and in chemical experiments. Now it has to be advertised."

"Sebastian has been spending money like water, apparently."

A word to that effect, brought back the boy's answer, unconvincing through her lips:

"Spending thousands to make millions. He tells me, in a year or two, I shall have ten thousand a year, at least! So you see, I do not want anything from you, but advice. You told me once that nearly every one who sought your acquaintance wanted something from you. Well, at least *I* do not want money!" she said, lightly.

Joe suffered from candour.

"Perhaps it is lucky I have some, though," he answered bluntly. He asked her:

"What did you do, finally, about those bills?"

"What bills?"

"That the manager came up about. Perhaps there is not money enough in the bank?"

She answered, quite calmly:

"I told him to let me know the amount."

That startled him.

"You wouldn't pay them yourself, without understanding the position, nor inquiring into it?"

"Why not? Sebastian will give it me back."

"And the amounts?"

"Five or six thousand pounds. I sent him six thousand five hundred, to be on the safe side. I borrowed it from my bank. I signed some papers, and transferred some securities. It seems rather complicated. I wish Sebastian had been at home. Mr. Jones gave me an impression of incompetence, of being uneasy and nervous."

"You expected the boy last week?"

"Yes, or to have heard from him."

He meant to take care of her, although she had not given him the right. He suspected—he had suspected, for some time past—that Sebastian had been over-trading on a limited capital; riding for a fall. There was a good deal of the Rendall paper about, but it was not ordinary merchandise, hand-made. It was stamped, and on narrow slips, bearing the name of P. and A. Rendall and Co. There was no use talking to her about it. The only thing, apparently, that her intelligence had missed, was the comprehension of money. It did not matter, fortunately. Nothing should matter. She might sign away her fortune, leave herself penniless. His money might, after all, buy him the priceless.

"Would you like me to see Mr. Jones?"

"I do not want to do anything that Sebastian would resent, that would look to him like interference, or doubt. But there must be no question of credit. I know Mr. Rendall paid ready money for

everything. I suppose I did right in trying to carry out his views ? " she asked. " I am a little worried. It seems like getting into debt myself ! Whatever they call it, of course, it is a loan."

He got up from beside her, took a turn or two about the room.

" I suppose you know what you've done ? You've given away half your income, half your income that is outside the business. You've had your eyes shut, and I suppose you want to keep 'em shut. The boy is running a business that wanted a quarter of a million of capital, on less than a hundred thousand pounds. The enlargement of the mills, and all that new plant and machinery, is a lock up of his resources. No one can run a manufacturing business without liquid assets."

" Liquid assets means the water, I suppose ? "

" Not exactly, though you might call it the ' driving power.' "

" You may spare me detail," she said, as she had said to the old clerk.

He came over to her.

" I'll spare you everything. I'll take everything on myself, set the boy on his feet again, if he has got out of his depth. I like his ambition, I'll put him right, and see he keeps right. Come, is it a bargain ? I want something for it : you know what I want."

It was astounding to her that Sebastian should have got into any difficulties in the City ; it was incredible.

" I cannot believe things are as you say. I should think you have been misinformed. I will see Mr. Jones again to-morrow. He did not tell me anything like that, only that we were overdrawn. There is money coming in, large payments are expected."

" Maybe. Or maybe he was counting on being able to renew the bills. But that's naught to me.

Are you going to let me look after you, that's the question."

He stood over her, it seemed almost menacingly, waiting for his answer.

"Well," he said, "well?" impatiently. It was not gentle wooing.

She told him so, with laughter that touched hysteria.

"Really, your money-or-you-life manner is so melodramatic."

"You mustn't mind my manner," he said, more gently. "Let me get back those securities for you; let me put things straight. I can do it easily if you say what I want you to, if you'll take me. I shall never give up asking you."

"I loathe married life." She grew flushed at the very thought of it.

"You've never tried it. That wasn't married life you lived with poor Rendall."

"It was enough to make me know how I hate to be tied."

He took another turn about the room:

"You don't give me any chance. You keep me at arm's length. This City affair now. . . . who else have you got to turn to?"

"You want me to marry you for your money?"

"What do I care what you marry me for?"

She listened to him now with ever-growing interest. She knew that it was a great deal that he was offering her, any woman might be proud of having inspired Joe Wallingford with so much feeling. The incident, and his attitude toward her was outside her experience. She searched her past for something that would help her, but there was nothing. Nevertheless, she was irrationally glad, and flattered. He had written to her about his wishes, a long time ago, and she had replied without difficulty, but this was different to a letter,

more difficult to meet. He seemed so much in earnest. For no reason she could find, her heart began to beat quickly.

He pressed his suit. He reminded her that she had many lonely hours, he said that there would be more of them as the boy's interests expanded. She cared for curios, he would give her money enough to buy the British Museum. He was ashamed of having said that; but it was in his mind, and he gave it speech. There might be shortage of money if Sebastian went on as he had been doing. She might have to give up her carriage.

Vanessa murmured that she "liked walking." He saw she was genuine in not seeing any money trouble in prospect, whatever an investigation into City matters would show. She had never known poverty, never seen it at close quarters, it had no terrors for her. And she was sure when Sebastian came home, everything would be found to be all right; she had unbounded confidence in him.

"All right!" He ceased his perambulations, his almost irritated insistence, and he drew up in front of her: "You think you can do without me; the advice you asked me for, you don't mean to take. For, mind you, I don't go behind my advice. It is 'marry me,' and be done with it. Well! you won't, you're obstinate about it. It's not that you don't like me——"

"I do like you," she interposed, quickly. He stooped:

"I've half a mind to make you."

He put an uncertain hand upon her shoulder. "There is a woman in you, I swear."

She flushed, she would have risen.

"Sit you still. I am not going to hurt you. Think of it again."

He kept his hand on her shoulder.

"You do know how I feel about you; you know that, anyway."

She could not get away from him without making too much of the incident. She was greatly embarrassed by his attitude, not quite sure what she must do; there was quite a light in his eyes. But she disliked his hand on her shoulder. She put hers up to release herself; and he caught it in his.

"Give me a hearing. What have you got against me?"

"It is not you, it is me. I am too old, for one thing."

"You're the age I want you to be."

"I'm so—so occupied."

"Well! aren't I a busy man?"

"Then, there is Sebastian." Her flush deepened under his regard, her confusion increased. Perhaps he thought it was his opportunity. He put his arms gently about her, his big arms, he kissed her.

It was incredible, impossible, unprecedented. But there was no doubt about it having happened. She put out both hands to ward him off; but she had no need. He was standing up now, waiting his sentence, waiting to hear if she would send him away, or bid him stay. She could find no words for him, no words at all.

"Well! Say at least you'll think it over! you won't forget."

Could she ever forget? She put up her shaking hands to her outraged face, burning now. She could not understand that she did not feel more angry.

"It—it was unpardonable," she began, helplessly. He was glad he was not being sent away, dismissed summarily. He would have to walk warily; he did not under-rate the difficulties in front of him. 'What would Stella say? Stella to whom I am all the world?"

"Yes, about Stella," he said, "tell me. Is she not any stronger? Does she take up more of your time?"

"I wish you would sit down, or, or look out of the window. I can't talk while you are standing up, and staring at me."

He went to the window obediently, even turned his back on her that she might recover her self-possession. He was surprised himself at what he had done.

"Tell me about Stella," he said again, but added, "I want to know everything, to share all your troubles."

It seemed as if she were arguing with herself, showing a weakness new to her.

"I cannot abandon my responsibilities. Perhaps I should not resent being—being cared for. But I am not free, not free in any way. Sebastian could not live alone, I know my companionship is much to him, vital almost, just now. Stella is out of health, I am often filled with anxiety about her. I try and disguise it, I tell her; and Bice, and myself, that she gains strength. But it is not true. She hardly goes out at all now, surrounding herself with books and flowers. If I fail in going there daily she resents it, I know she does, even if she does not say so. Bice is not the companion to her that I am, however much she may care about her."

Vanessa was following her own thoughts, following them aloud. A new point had been reached in her intimacy with Joe Wallingford, she felt nearer to him, it was even possible his wish might become hers. "Sometimes I dream—I dream that Stella is leaving me. I cannot give you what I owe to her. I can put no one in her place——"

"And afterward—afterward?" he asked, coming near to her again.

The unready tears were hot behind her eyes, although they did not fall.

"Don't press me, let me think. You have said enough for to-day, give me time."

He stooped, he kissed her hand.

"Quite right. I've said enough, you've been very good to me. I'll go now, and you will let me see you oftener. I'll not stand between you and your dear ones. Tell me when I may come again."

She was glad to be alone. She had never voiced her fears for Stella, now all at once they shook her. She would not marry Joe Wallingford, marriage was not for her, she had so many responsibilities, interests.

But often she remembered that Joe Wallingford had kissed her, and that she had not been angry. She forgot for what she had sent for him, the difficulties in Queen Victoria Street passed out of her mind.

CHAPTER XXI

SEBASTIAN was overdue. There was no doubt about it. The third week had gone by, and now the fourth, and still there came no letter, and no Sebastian. She heard no further disquieting news from the City, she told herself that this proved Joe Wallingford to have been wrong, there was no trouble impending there, he had jumped to a wrong conclusion, misled perhaps by what she had told him. She could not get Joe Wallingford out of her mind. He had said that he did not mean to give up his intentions. Could it be that she was glad? Again, it was her writing that suffered, and the new book, "*The Education of a Novelist*," became subordinate to a certain pleasure she had in recalling a moment, a phrase, an action, reviving in herself that untoward flush, and heat of the blood.

Perhaps—but all the possibilities that thronged her were dependent on what Sebastian might say. What was delaying him? A vague uneasiness arose, was banished, persisted.

Stella had taken advantage of Bice's absence to try a fortnight at Brighton. She returned before Vanessa's uneasiness took concrete form.

She had brought back grapes and orchids; roses and violets bloomed in her vases and dishes. But she was looking no better for the change, very frail and tired.

"Saighton brought me up," she explained. "He has been staying at Brighton for the week-end. Tell

me all your news. What does Sebastian write of the trip? Bice was enthusiastic at first, but I fancy her enthusiasm has died down considerably. I have not heard at all for more than a week."

"Sebastian and I have a sort of unwritten contract about letters, he hates the idea of them following him about. And we find if we do not correspond there is more to talk about when we see each other. He ought to be home really, he was due last week. He is wanted at the office, too. I believe I am getting worried about him."

"Well! you are always more or less worried about him, are you not? There is nothing new in that," Stella answered, wearily.

"Did Bice's letters say anything about Sebastian?"

"Every letter reiterated that Sebastian was an angel, or words to that effect."

"Did she say he was quite well?"

"Of course he is quite well. Why not? He is young, happy. He has something to live for."

"I wish they were back," Vanessa repeated again. "I suppose there is no cause for their delay? I am full of presentiment, forebodings." She wanted reassurance.

"What could have happened?" Stella asked her.

"There have been such things as motor accidents."

"Yes! But not motor annihilations. Including the chauffeur, there were four people in the car. *One* must have lived to tell the tale."

But when Stella realised that Vanessa was genuinely ill at ease, she discontinued rallying, and roused herself to argue with her. There had been times, capable of psychic explanation no doubt, during Sebastian's school career, when an attack of measles, or mumps, influenza, or a football mishap, had been known to Vanessa before the letter announcing it arrived. In early days, Stella had refused to

acknowledge this phenomena. If any one had such hold on Vanessa as that, it should have been she, her twin.

But of late years there was grey, stifling mist between her and her sister, growing ever thicker and sadder, a soft sea-mist of tears. Through it they no longer saw each other clearly; even their speech together was dulled. All this Stella felt to-day, returning from her ever more fruitless journey after health. Her spirits were chilled, and the premonition of misfortune she read in Vanessa's mind found immediate pale reflection in her own.

Could anything be wrong with the motor party?

They began to argue with themselves, with each other, to calculate times and distances, to discuss the French and Swiss postal systems, to talk of possible punctures, breakdowns.

The premonition of evil remained; no amount of talk, nor argument, could dissipate it.

A telegram, received a day or two later, from Bice, lightened the disquietude, but only partially relieved the anxiety.

"Motor party broken up. Folkestone 3.18. Home to dinner."

Stella sent it to Vanessa, and together the sisters awaited the arrival, and the explanation. As they sat, they exhausted conjecture. If Sebastian had been ill, for, of course, that was the spectre Vanessa conjured up, Bice would not have left him. There was no doubt about that. Yet, that something ailed Sebastian, that he was in trouble, trouble of mind or body, his mother could not doubt. The tie between them was really close; in her uneven heart-beats and distressful pulses she knew all was not normal with her son. Psychic, or merely human, she could not persuade herself her fears were groundless.

She wanted to meet Bice at the station, but it was impossible to leave Stella. Stella had had several attacks of faintness in the last forty-eight hours. Dr. Gifford had been backwards and forwards, making light of them.

He said to Vanessa :

" I shouldn't go to Victoria if I were you. The train might be ten minutes late, and Mrs. Ashton would conjure up both of you in a collision. I should stay here, together, until Bice comes with her story." He was quite in their confidence, and secretly shared their anxiety. " It will be a very simple one, you see, you are both of you working yourselves into a panic over nothing."

Vanessa took the hint that she must not leave Stella alone, she knew Dr. Gifford's methods, her knowledge of him told her he was not satisfied with Stella's condition. She neglected nothing of his orders for diet, stimulant, or medicine.

" There she is ! I hear the cab stop," Stella cried out suddenly, pale among the cushions. " You run down ; I'll stay here. Make her speak loud, I shall hear her voice on the stairs."

Vanessa had not waited for permission. She was down the stairs, and at the street door, before Bice had got the cab door opened. Her voice reached Stella through the open widows of the drawing-room.

" How is mummy ? "

" Sebastian, how did you leave Sebastian ? "

" All right. He was quite well all the time."

" The motor ? "

" Is mummy all right ? "

" She is in the drawing-room. Talk loud, she wants to hear your voice."

" I'll rush up. I knew she had been ill."

" You are quite sure Sebastian is well ? "

" He was quite well when I left him."

Vanessa let her get her first greeting over with her mother. For a full ten minutes she restrained her impatience for news, for detail.

When she went upstairs again, Bice was on her knees, her head in her mother's lap.

"I ought not to have come away," Vanessa heard her saying. "I know I ought not to have. But I couldn't bear it. . . ."

She did not rise when her aunt came in. Stella's hand was on her hair, soothing her.

"There is nothing the matter with Sebastian," Stella said, quickly. "The party was inharmonious from the first. They did not stay long together. Bice left the others in Zurich, more than a week ago."

"I had to," Bice whispered. But Stella went on, as if she had not heard.

"It was a series of misunderstandings. Mr. Hayling behaved badly. Pleasey——"

But Bice rose suddenly to her feet.

"Wait until Aunt Vanessa hears it from the others. It was all horrid. But I'm home again now."

She threw herself on the sofa, pressing her head to her mother's breast.

"I'm home again with my mummy. I'll never leave her again, will I? You wanted me back all the time, didn't you?"

Vanessa knew she must leave them with each other, but she was full of a natural curiosity, still not freed from fears. She accepted Bice's assurance that the boy was well, but it left her unsatisfied.

She went away reluctantly; it was all very unsatisfactory. Why did not Sebastian return, or at least write? It was unlike him to be inconsiderate of her.

Stella never heard the full detail of that motor trip; it is doubtful if even Vanessa penetrated all

its mysteries. Stella heard that, at first, Bice liked Mr. Hayling, and that then—she didn't. But the reasons she gave for her change of feeling, were involved and difficult. She was not confidential about Pleasey, either; she could not speak freely of Pleasey, even to her mother.

Things had not been so bad until they got to Aix. And at Aix, for a short time, she had been happier than at any other part of the tour. Mr. Hayling taught Pleasey to play baccarat; he took banks with her. He wanted Sebastian to play, but Sebastian said he had had his lesson, he would never gamble again as long as he lived. Mr. Hayling had chaffed him, and called him a milksop, but it had not made any difference. She and Sebastian had had many hours together, and had explored the country, revelling in the beauty of mountain, lake and gorge. But one of these trips all of them had taken together. It was to the Grande Chartreuse. Their own motor was being repaired, and they had hired two. It was supposed that she and her cousin were to occupy one, and in that order they started. But Mr. Hayling had driven back with her. . . .

There came a pause; Bice did not want to talk about the drive. She would say no more about Mr. Hayling.

Stella heard that Pleasey and Sebastian came back very late from the Grande Chartreuse; it appeared they had had a puncture.

"Pleasey asked me what Mr. Hayling had talked to me about in the hours we had been together, whether he had talked about her. I told her he—he was horrid. She said such strange things to me about him! And I thought she had cared always for Sebastian, mummy!"

"What sort of things?" asked Stella, holding the girl in her weak arms, listening to her confidences,

with her heart a little cold. In this, too, had she failed? Had she guarded her young daughter so badly; had evil shown itself to her so soon?

But over such as Bice, or such as Sebastian Rendall, evil passes comparatively harmlessly.

Bice could not repeat what Pleasey had said to her about Mr. Hayling; she did not want to remember. But they had never been really good friends after that conversation. And Bice had been miserable. Neither Bice nor Sebastian had wished to remain on at Aix. Mr. Hayling had driven them to Zurich. Apparently the drive had been pleasant, and some sort of peace was patched up between the parties. For Bice told of a wonderful sunset behind snow-clad mountains, snow and sun reflection on the green waters of Lake Geneva, of a panorama of spring loveliness in the clear air.

"In Zurich Mr. Hayling asked me to—to forgive him. He said——"

"That he had fallen in love with my baby?"

"He was horrid, mummy, horrid! I told Sebastian."

"And Sebastian?"

"He thought he had better tell Pleasey, he said that Pleasey knew him so well she would speak to him, and tell him to leave me alone. Sebastian was so good about it, so sweet."

"And then?"

"Pleasey told Sebastian I must have been imagining things!"

"Sebastian agreed with her?"

"He believes anything Pleasey tells him. Mr. Hayling told me so, he laughed about it. He said he had led her off the scent. Mummy, aren't men beastly? Mr. Hayling was always—was always—dodging me about; you know what I mean—in . . . in corridors, everywhere. I ran away, I know I ought

not to have been such a coward. Pleasey was being so nice to Sebastian, and making him believe in her. Then when he wasn't looking, she was being nice to Mr. Hayling. And he was laughing at her, to me; and—and dodging. I couldn't bear it, I ran away. I wouldn't come straight home, I was afraid Mr. Hayling would follow me in the car. So I went on to Frankfort." (Bice had had a year at school there.) "I went to Frau von Schroeder. I didn't tell her anything, except that I had been travelling with a motor party, and the party had broken up. She wouldn't let me come home alone. She was awfully kind and nice. She knew some people who were coming to England in a few days, and she made me wait for them. They brought me as far as Folkestone—an old professor and his two sisters, stuffy sort of people, but quite nice. Are you angry with me? Oughtn't I to have come away? You don't know how horrid it all was. And it seemed as if they were both deceiving Sebastian, and I couldn't make him know. I couldn't bear that, I didn't know what to do."

That was Bice's version of the story—a sufficiently difficult one to convey to Vanessa.

The full force of the blow, for which she had been unconsciously waiting, fell upon her before she understood the significance of what little she had heard.

It came in a letter from Sebastian, nearly a week after Bice's return. It was not like his usual letters; and it conveyed incredible news, heart-breaking news. He had stayed in Geneva, waiting the necessary formalities. He had married Pleasey Pleyden-Carr! He said he could not write about his happiness, his unspeakable happiness! His mother would forgive his not having waited to consult her; he would explain everything when he saw her. He

was bringing his wife home, he knew his mother would love Pleasey, would welcome them both!

It was heart-breaking, devastating, irretrievable.

She could not face Stella with her news. She kept it for a day, like an asp in her breast it burned within her; it was poison in the wound, that she had not foreseen his danger, not guarded him against it. It was almost unbearable that perhaps she had wandered from him in thought, that perhaps the link between them had been weakened, the light obscured, by Joe Wallingford. What had transpired between her and Joe was secret, and now it was a secret shame. Her life belonged to her son; she had faltered in her trust.

With a heart like lead, with feet that lagged, she did, nevertheless, what Sebastian asked of her in his letter.

She told the news to the household; she had rooms prepared for them. And she went to see Pleasey's parents, went to that sordid lodging house in Wimbledon, renewing a painful, half-obliterated memory.

Mrs. Pleyden-Carr was at home. Vanessa saw in a moment that her news would be no news to Pleasey's mother. How the old story came back, the story of Pleyden-Carr's dismissal from the Embassy, the rumours, the disgraceful truth!

The tall, gaunt woman who rose to greet her in the stuffy parlour, redolent of mutton fat and musty poverty, had once been accounted beautiful, and had held her position in the inner circle of Italian society. In his cups, Ambrose Pleyden-Carr had let out to her an international secret. No one knew exactly what occurred, but the secret was betrayed almost immediately, and it was suspected that his wife had told it to an Italian lover. All that followed was a nightmare of blurred remembrance. Hepplewight-Ventom had helped them,

everybody had tried to help them. But the weakness of moral character was in both husband and wife, and deterioration had been rapid.

Mrs. Pleyden-Carr held out a soiled and shaky hand, she had lost even her self-respect, her care for her person; she was one with her sordid surroundings.

"I have just heard the great news," she said; "Mr. Carr has gone out to telegraph to them."

"You were surprised?"

"I never thought Pleasey would have married a business man. Her father always said that when Lord St. Clair came home from Egypt, he would see that she had the right introductions. You would hardly believe it, but Pleasey has not even been presented! We were waiting for the St. Clairs. I don't know what they will say at having a married woman to present! Our Pleasey—it seems impossible!" She laughed affectedly.

The artificiality of it all, the high falsetto voice, and assumption that things were not as they seemed on the surface, that they were still in their old position, turned her sick. Anything had been better than that. Frankness, simplicity, honest poverty, would not have repelled her. Ambrose Pleyden-Carr did nothing to relieve the situation, when he hurried in.

He was, perhaps, less completely a wreck than his wife. Behind his shabbiness, one could see a shadowy something, a possibility that he had once been a gentleman. But it was like a spirit photograph, it might be there, or it might not, there was no substance in it.

"I have just telegraphed to that naughty girl of mine," he began. "To think of her marrying in this way!" He had evidently been ill coached in his part. "And before the Lechlades return from India! Lady Lechlade *will* be disappointed; she

had set her heart on bringing Pleasey out. They have no girls of their own, you know. Pleasey would have had such opportunities. Lord Lechlade would have been sure to admire her. This sudden marriage is such a surprise to us; you won't mind if I say, something of a disappointment!"

"You anticipated a great alliance for your daughter?" Vanessa answered dully, sick at heart. Such pin-pricks as their assumption of disappointment could not hurt her. The poison in her veins was that she might have saved him. *Had* her thoughts wandered from him?

She tried to be courteous, to pretend to believe what they told her. Although she knew quite well that they lived by writing begging letters to those who had met them in reputable days, she listened whilst they used big names, talking of those who pitied and helped them, as if they were still intimate personal friends. Even it it had not been for this awful, this irremediable marriage of Sebastian's, they would have been alike intolerable in themselves, and in the reminiscences they evoked.

"I remember your father coming to me about his book on missal paper. Was it ever finished? I don't recollect his sending me a copy. I am glad to say I was able to be of great assistance to him. I gained him access to the Castellento Collection. You remember——"

She remembered. Her father had put little jobs in his way, jobs of copying documents, making extracts. They had not fallen so low as this then, not nearly so low. Ambrose had still tried to get work. She recalled her father's description of his capacity: "His mind is a lumber-room, he cannot get at what is stored there."

Now he talked on:

"You remember our Pleasey when she was quite a little girl, don't you? She was always a great beauty,

people used to turn round to look at her in the streets. When the Grand Duke——"

"Mrs. Rendall could not remember Pleasey," Mrs. Carr reminded him, with dignity. "Pleasey was the baby in those days, it is twenty years ago since we were in Florence. It is Violetta she would remember, our beautiful Violetta . ." She put her soiled handkerchief to her rheumy eyes. Pleasey was something older than her bridegroom, Pleasey's age must be obscured!

Vanessa's blurred memory called up other children. Pretty, lint-haired babies, boys and girls, four or five of them, had been part of the pathos of the position, that which had moved the English colony in Rome to pity when the catastrophe happened.

She asked of these children. They had slipped through weak, incompetent hands. One lay buried in Florence, and one at St. Rapello. Violetta lay in Rome. Vanessa thought bitterly it was well that they were dead. The Pleyden-Carrs recalled who the godfathers and godmothers had been, reciting their names, talking as if Grand Dukes, and Royalty, had been proud to stand sponsors to their children. Mrs. Carr said they had had many troubles, losing their dear ones. Now there were only Pleasey and Zuley.

All the time Vanessa's visit lasted, Zuley sat and stared at her. She was paler even than Pleasey, her scant hair was white, and white, too, the eyelashes of her blinking eyes.

There was no understanding in her, and limited speech; she had a cleft palate, and a wandering disposition towards forbidden things. She wore a battered red velvet, three-cornered hat. It was horribly incongruous, and absurd this warm spring day. Afterwards Vanessa learnt that, indoors, or out of doors, in velvet, in plush, or in felt, she clung

to this insignia. God alone knows what it meant to her. But it was impossible to take it from her; she was never seen without it. All through that visit Vanessa paid, Zuley played with her three-cornered Napoleonic hat, setting it now and again on her untidy head, posing vacantly.

CHAPTER XXII

IT was incredible he should look so radiantly well, so extravagantly happy.

"Where is the mater?"

She heard his voice in the hall, on the stairs. She went out to welcome him, but her eyes were misty.

"I surprised you this time, didn't I? I left Pleasey at Victoria, she has gone off to see her people; she will be back in time for dinner." He noticed her pallor. "You didn't mind, you weren't sick about it, were you? It will be ever so much cheerier for you, having some one to be with you when I'm out." He put his arm about her, he kissed her cheek, he was unwontedly affectionate. "Have you missed me, old dear?"

It moved her; nothing had the power to move her like any demonstration from Sebastian, it was so unusual with him. The tenderness that lay so deep in her, trickled out painfully to meet him. She saw, notwithstanding his flippant entry, that he was a little outside himself, wanting sympathy. She must wait to hear all he would tell her. Now she had to nerve herself to give him something of what he wanted—reassurance, and evidence that it was indeed home where he had come.

"I was right to bring her here?"

"Of course. Isn't this your home?"

"Don't think it was only a sudden impulse. I have always wanted her. I should never have done

those rotten things I did, gone that mucker, but that I thought she did not care for me, that it was hopeless. She has forgiven me, I have told her everything."

"You have had a tiring journey?" It was so difficult to dissimulate with him.

"Poor old mater! Now that I know what it is to be married myself, I am so awfully sorry for you. I have thought of it so often lately. . . . you must be beastly lonely at times. I wish I had been different to you. I understand now so much better than I did. . . ."

She could not bear his self-reproach, that he should think she missed David. She answered hurriedly:

"You have been everything to me, all and more than a son could be. You would like to go upstairs to see what I have arranged for you? You have the two rooms over mine, the front one, and the one that was your father's."

"But who will sleep next to you?"

"Don't, Sebastian, don't!" she cried out. But he had little understanding of the source of her distress.

He wanted to talk now, he was eager to tell her all about it, and how it had come about. He said he should use his old bedroom as a dressing-room, and then they could have talks together. He made her come upstairs with him now. He had not discarded her, he still needed her. Again his arm went about her waist.

"I want to tell you all about everything," he said.

"Did the motor go well?"

Poor Vanessa! She found words so difficult, tears so hot behind her eyes.

"I'll begin at the beginning. You haven't got anything else to do, have you? Sit with me whilst I dress."

All the time he was talking, he was changing his

coat for a lounge jacket, washing his hands and face, brushing his hair before the mirror, interposing irrelevant matter about shoes, the necessity of having all his clothes pressed, and telling her the number of things he had left behind him at different hotels.

"Pleasey is worse than I am," he said, "she never knows where she has put anything, she has left half her clothes between here and Zurich! You want to know all about everything. I'll begin at the beginning. We did Folkestone under the three hours, slowing down three times for police traps. He is a wonder, that chauffeur of Bob's. We had a very good time in Paris, the girls went nearly everywhere with us; not the *Rat Mort*, or *Maxim's*, but everywhere else. We were a party *carré*, just the right number. Bice amused Bob, and at first she seemed to like him. She did all the talking in shops and places, for all of us. His French is unspeakable."

"Unspoken?"

"No! that was the worst of it." He was as quick as she in realising he had used the misappropriate word. "It is really good to get back to you! No, it wasn't unspoken, he liked airing it."

Then followed a description of what they had done in Paris, interspersed with splashing, and inquiry for some soap Vanessa used to get for him, and which he had mislaid.

"We started for Aix after ten days in Paris, and there was trouble with the tyres; we had three punctures in one afternoon! The engine was knocking most of the time, and we were running on three cylinders. . . ."

Now he chatted about routes, and the French Touring Association, then French inn accommodation, price of petrol, something about speedometers.

"We got to Aix at last. But nothing was going

well. Bice was sulking with Bob over something or other, and Pleasey was awfully worried about it. Bice has always had a bad temper, you know, but she was always all right with me. It was the day we went to the Grande Chartreuse that she really broke. You know the Grande Chartreuse? Grey walls, grey corridors, grey environment, empty, piteous, appealing. Pleasey and I had a jolly time there. We lunched at the restaurant; an omelette, *velouté de veau*, and *soufflé* potatoes. Why don't we get that kind of cooking at Pangbourne, or anywhere up the river? We got separated from the others. I think Bob was all along getting fond of Bice, although Pleasey said I was quite wrong. You know, mater, Bice is pretty useful; she did the packing, and unpacking for the lot of us. We never lost a thing whilst she was with us. And she did the catering, and looked out all the routes. But it seems there was a' bust up ' between her and Bob on the way home from the Chartreuse. She told Pleasey about it, and Pleasey ragged him properly. They had long confabs about it. Pleasey made me leave them together, she wanted to get at Bob's intentions. But, of course, he is too old for Bice, not quite . . . well, I suppose he really is not quite good enough. Bice took against him, same as you did, you recollect, mater?"

"You all went on to Zurich together?"

"Yes, and that was the end of it."

He had finished dressing, he linked his arm in hers:

"Come down to the drawing-room, I'll finish the story there. We shall have lots of time, Pleasey is sure to be late, she's always late."

Vanessa heard of Bice's disappearance, and Pleasey's distress about it. Telegrams were sent off, and Bob started, (as Bice had anticipated) in search of her in the motor. Sebastian had to look after Pleasey, of course. It was a distressing position

in which the poor girl found herself. Pleasey, Sebastian said, had scene after scene with Bob over his treatment of Bice, trying to get at the bottom of it. Sebastian really believed that Pleasey's stormy interviews with Mr. Hayling, from which she ever emerged tear-stained and wretched, were to get a clue to Bice's disappearance! In the end Bob had got ruffled by her suspicions, or her accusations, and had started off to England without consulting their wishes, practically without giving them an opportunity of accompanying him. Pleasey, by then, Sebastian said, was quite unfit to travel, broken down by her anxieties.

"You know, mater," he said, as if it were an addition to her charms, "she is awfully delicate, the least thing knocks her up, she can't even pack for herself."

It was the only time Vanessa varied from the course of conduct she had laid down for herself.

"It seems, then, she is utterly incapable. What could Stella have been thinking of to entrust Bice to her!" she exclaimed, not waiting to think, not calculating her words.

He flushed with anger, or perhaps pride.

"Bice has always looked after her; Aunt Stella never knew, but that is how it has always been. She is really only a child, she is not fit to take care of herself, and—and I want to do it. Mater, I care about her, I am so glad when she lets me do things for her, so proud." He faltered a little on this last, the tone of his voice was a revelation—a pain. "I feel differently about her to what I have ever felt for any one before. She has had such a rotten time. Old Pleyden-Carr is an impracticable person, they have never had any fixed home, she has had to work for her living, been awfully poor, even hungry." His voice dropped, he broke off. In his own way he was entreating his mother's sympathy.

"I want her to have a good time. You have made me rather selfish, mater." His tone grew tender, affectionate even. This was not the boyish Sebastian, it seemed he had at last grown to some new manhood. "You have always been so good to me, you and the pater. And Pleasey has had nothing!"

"Would nothing less than my son content her?"

"You will try and care for her, won't you? I—I love her, like the pater did you. I know now that he never thought of anybody else, except, sometimes perhaps, of me. Nothing was too good for you; he told me once that loving a woman, as he hoped I should one day, made one humble. I know what he meant, now. He wasn't like other men. I don't think I am, perhaps, but we have both of us been lucky in finding the one woman."

She knew loyalty and fidelity was inherent in him, and that it had been so, too, with David. Perhaps then, for the first time, she had sharp realisation of what her indifference might have meant to her husband. Something it seemed of retribution, this marriage of Sebastian's; but it made it worse, not better, if he must suffer for her sins. And what but suffering must ensue of a union between the fine spirit, the strength, and brain power, of such as he, with the feeble personality, and thin incompetency she divined in the wife that had been foisted on him. It all surged over her as she listened to him, the hopelessness of it, the irremediableness of it.

Pleasey was late. She came in about ten minutes to eight. The boy had been listening for some time, making excuses for her to his mother. Vanessa liked an orderly and punctual house, it was the one excuse that may be made for any subsequent mistake in her treatment of Sebastian's wife, that it was never punctual nor orderly from the moment Pleasey came into it. To-night, perhaps, was

pardonable, accounted for by the reunion with her family, and all she must have had to tell them.

Vanessa looked at her critically, when some five-and-twenty minutes late, the three of them sat down to a spoiled meal. She had done, and said, the conventional thing, made her son's wife welcome. Perhaps she had regarded Bice's companion with perfunctory interest until now. Now all her heart was in her eyes.

Pleasey, never very natural, had adopted a new affectation with her marriage. Vanessa heard the echo of her mother's voice in her italics. And all her story, as she spoke it, was tainted with poor untruth.

After dinner, when they had left Sebastian to his wine and were alone together in the drawing room, Pleasey said, with an attempt at impulsive spontaneity:

"I think it was *perfectly sweet* of you to let us come here. Sebastian was so keen on it."

And Vanessa, driven by the pain in her heart, asked a question. There could be only one anodyne, she asked for it, almost humbly:

"Do you care for my boy?"

"I *simply adore him*," came unconvincingly.

It was many months before the climax was reached, but the daily impossibilities of a life led under one roof for these two, revealed themselves from the very beginning.

Pleasey would not breakfast with Sebastian and his mother, neither would she, as her hostess suggested, have her meal sent up to her bedroom. She came down, when the coffee was cold, the bacon congested, and a disorder of plates and dishes gave her a familiar atmosphere. And then she would have liked Vanessa to sit with her, listening to aimless, staccato, empty gossip. She had nothing to do, she did nothing. She had no hatred of her mother-in-law, such as, unfortunately, Vanessa so soon

conceived for her. But all her slovenly habits proved uncongenial, and to play hostess to her, be courteous, and not critical, became an ever more intolerable burden.

Pleasey idled an hour over her breakfast; she had no appetite, took one thing or another on her plate, and left it there, filled her cup, but forgot to drink, hindered the servants in their duty, kept Vanessa from her desk.

After breakfast, she sat on, doing nothing, talking about her hair, or her dress, or some shopping she must accomplish, until nearly noon. At noon she would suddenly discover she wanted something in a great hurry. She would "rush away" to dress; she called it "rushing," but more irrelevant talk delayed her. She would be something like an hour adjusting her hat, preparing for the street, during which time Vanessa sat thinking of her, in exasperated expectancy, unable to settle until she had gone. Then she would "rush" in again, on her way here, or there, to inquire the hour for lunch, would find she was short of time, and sit down, whilst a cab was whistled for her. Although her admitted destination might be only five minutes off, she must have a cab. And she *never* succeeded in returning in time for the meal. It is no exaggeration to say that until the hour Vanessa's patience broke, Pleasey had never once managed to sit down to any one meal at the same moment as her hostess.

Of course, the deep temperamental differences between the two women was at the root of the trouble. Vanessa was ever conscious of her injustice, of the triviality of the things she found unbearable in Sebastian's wife. Pleasey was con scious of nothing, save desire, she was insatiable of luxury.

It was rarely Sebastian asked his wife to do anything for him, repair a hole in a torn dressing-

gown, put a button on a new glove, order hair lotion, or theatre tickets. But rare as these commissions were, Pleasey never succeeded in executing them. She said, alternately, that she had been "feeling *so* seedy," or that she had been "*so* busy." And of course those critical clear eyes of Vanessa's saw that she was never too ill, nor too tired to shop, or dress, or amuse herself, and that she did nothing whatever from morning until evening, for her people, nor for Bice, nor for herself, except wear out each looking glass in the house by her intent regard, grow daily idler, vainer, more extravagant, and artificial. Vanessa was intolerant, and critical, and "beggar on horseback" was the phrase that bored her with its recurrent inevitability.

As the days wore on, Pleasey grew indefinitely aware of Vanessa's attitude toward her, and bore herself more uneasily. She ceased to use a paste stick to her pale lips when she met Vanessa's contemptuous regard, even her powder-puff became something of a surreptitious indulgence. Pleasey was never too delicate to try on clothes, or trapse the streets, or park, decked in showy finery; but to Vanessa she appeared sickly and unwholesome, by dint of her feebleness of character. It was true that she was amiable, as Stella and Bice had so often repeated. That is to say, she never argued, she only cried when one failed to admire a new dress, or commend a purchase, when Sebastian, overtired, would beg off from a theatre or entertainment, or queried an extravagance.

She neither worked, nor read, nor wrote; sometimes, and this but rarely, she scanned a novel. But it never held her, it lay in her lap whilst she planned new costumes. She cared for her body, that was the beginning, and end of her day. She lavished endless hours in supplementing nature's kindness to her. Her eyelashes blacked, and standing

out stickily, the waved and shaded abundance of her lint hair, became the entire woman to Vanessa, and Sebastian's wife a mere manikin, or less still, a padded and wired dress-stand, surmounted by a hair-dresser's waxen face. Mechanically Vanessa found herself watching to see her fade.

And, as Pleasey became more and more conscious of Vanessa's attitude towards her, she exhibited herself always less attractively. She evaded *têtes-à-têtes* now, and came in, and went out, unpunctually, with little lying excuses.

Her untruthfulness was ingrain, it seemed to Vanessa to make all conversation impossible. If she were asked casually if she had been shopping, she would say "No," and ten minutes afterwards would talk of her purchases. If she said she had been in the West End, it almost certainly turned out that she had been seen in the East.

Vanessa spoke to Sebastian once about this untruthfulness. It was slow in dawning upon him that his mother and his wife were uncongenial. It was possible that by this time his wife had also made her comment.

"Well, mater, you ought not to question her! She is nervous with you. She does not know what you are trying to get at."

"But why should I be trying to get at anything? I want nothing except that you should be happy; but can you, or any one, be happy with a woman upon whose word you cannot rely? I think you might suggest this to her! I won't say anything more, perhaps I should not have said so much. But I wish you would beg her not to tell me these silly little lies. I am trying to carry out your wishes and be kind to her. I talk to her, but she cannot concentrate her mind to answer consistently. She grows vaguer, and vaguer, and repeats "Oh! really," until the mere iteration paralyses

my brain. She wanders from any of the things in which I try to interest her, to the size of her waist, the condition of her hair, her dress, or some new scent——"

"Mater, you know you don't mean what you are saying. She is all right with me. You don't understand her, she is nervous with you. The pater used to be the same."

He did his best to make the home life pleasant or possible, poor boy, wavering neither in love nor loyalty, to either wife or mother. He was going through a hard and difficult time in the City. Trouble had been waiting for him, and he braced himself to meet it. Already he had thanked Vanessa for her loan, for what she had done for him in his absence. He had been diffident in asking if she minded that the repayment should be left over for the present. He admitted difficulties, but said they would be overcome. He was obviously full of cares, working eight and ten hours a day. Pleasey yawned and found the evenings dull. Every single day she went out, to spend in extravagant gee-gaws for the adornment of her person, the money he worked so hard to gain. Always Vanessa's resentment of her grew. She was so unnecessary, her staccato speech so hollow and mechanical. These months were full of a sense of foreboding, of mental discomfort, and of incidents, like blind alleys, that seemed to lead nowhere. Sebastian's wife had no sympathy nor understanding of Sebastian's anxieties, she had no interest beyond fashion plates and unguents. She was a strange, unnatural intruder into strenuous lives.

Stella, whose society was the one haven of refuge Vanessa had from the home permeated by Pleasey's clothes and person, the mental and moral twilight of her atmosphere, tried to make her sister look more leniently on the disastrous marriage. It

was Stella's state of health, by the way, that had been the burden of Vanessa's last letter to Joe Wallingford. She told him what he wished was yet impossible, notwithstanding Sebastian's marriage. *Wait*, was what he read between the lines of finality, and he had infinite patience. He ignored the dismissal in his reply, and asked her of the business. She had nothing to tell him, the boy had told her nothing; he was working very hard.

She was glad he did not attempt to reverse her decision, yet still wrote to her. He stood beyond the distress and uneasiness of her days like firm ground beyond quicksand. She saw no way to get to it, engulfment and disaster were at her feet, but beyond, out of reach, hopeless of attainment, was solid earth and safety.

Stella was sympathetic, in her own way, of the minor troubles; they became minor in Stella's sick-room.

"You take her wrongly," she said, wearily, "you don't see her good points. She is pretty, and amiable, and the boy adores her. She looks well in her clothes, and better in better clothes. What more do you want?"

"Qualities, capacity. I should like her simple, sincere, truthful; even if she be without ideals."

"Hasn't she ideals? How do you know?"

"I have never heard her serious and concentrate but once. That was when she said: 'I'd give *anything on earth* for a *long* ermine coat! Do you think I'll *ever* have an ermine coat, Sebastian?'"

"Well, she would look better in it than any one else; why shouldn't she want an ermine cloak? You can't complain of want of simplicity in her expression of her wishes. Put her in a Paquin get-up, with a bunch of gardenias, or violets, at her waist, and let her wander up and down Bond Street, looking into the shop-windows, and she will be as

happy as the day is long, and surely she will not be in your way. You don't want to walk up and down Bond Street, do you ? "

" She will be happy until she sees something she cannot afford," Vanessa interpolated, bitterly, " and then she will buy it, nevertheless, and try it on before every glass in the house."

All the things that irritated Vanessa seemed so small to Stella.

" Does it matter ? It seems to me, these days, that nothing matters. I have worried over so many things. And now they all seem trivial."

She had lived her years, unsafely, in the haunted shadows that veil the figure of naked shame. And the fear that had shaken her heart was lest the veil should be rent asunder by pitiless hands, and the figure be betrayed to the incredulous, and horrified, eyes of the two who loved her. What were any troubles in comparison with what she had gone through ? But it was nearly over, the time had nearly come for frankness.

" I hate you to be annoyed, but I really think you are taking this too seriously. It was not probable you would have liked any one Sebastian selected."

" I would have cared for anybody that cared for him, I would have left him in any hands that moved about him lovingly," Vanessa said, passionately.

Stella looked at her, inquiringly.

" Left him, left him ? "

" Joe Wallingford——"

" Oh ! "

" But how can I leave him ? She does not care if he be well or ill. He had a headache one night last week, and she said vaguely, when he told her, ' Poor darling.' It was after dinner, and he was lying on the sofa. I hoped he would fall asleep. You know he has always had these head-

aches, and just now he is over-working. He was looking a trifle better, his breathing deeper, as if he were easier, growing drowsy, when her staccato voice roused him, roused us both:

"'Sebastian, did I tell you? I saw such an *exquisite* gold bag at Phillips's to-day. I *must* have a gold bag, *every one* has one. This is all wrinkled and full, little diamonds and rubies in the chains. . . .' He roused himself, his rest was broken. But what did she care? She had forgotten he had a headache! And then, when he said wearily, that he supposed it was 'expensive,' and money was tight, and wouldn't she wait, she begged for it! Neither dignity, nor his condition, nor my presence restrained her. She *wanted* it, 'Pleasey *wants* it,' she begged, with an affectation of childishness. It turned out afterwards she had actually sent it home! She said it was only for him to see, but of course she had bought it. She has inherited the paternal, or maternal, notions of honour. My boy went so white. 'The throbbing has come back, mater,' he said to me, 'can't you get me anything, phenacetin, or something?' Oh! it is piteous, piteous to se ehow little she cares for anything but herself! And I, it seems to me I never cared so much for him as now, nor in the same way. There are times when I don't know how to bear the way she behaves."

"You ought to leave them to each other."

"And know him without companionship, in bondage to a doll." And then came the final cry: "Living, side by side, with a light woman who does not even know that he is in difficulties, nor care to help him through them, who will always be a burden, and never a helpmate."

Vanessa knew it, she could not shut out the knowledge that was borne in upon her all the time. He would not speak to her of what was amiss. But, at last they were real mother-eyes that watched, eyes cleared by tears.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTERWARDS it seemed as if all the troubles came at once, the blind alleys converging, and opening on to one waste space. The very afternoon that she voiced her troubles to Stella, and Stella had made light of them, Sebastian came home early from the City, and went at once to his room; the room that was peculiarly his, next to her own.

She entered the hall, with heavy heart, to hear that "Mr. Sebastian came home with a bad headache, he would be glad if you would go up to him when you came in."

Pleasey had been in, but had gone out again, leaving no message.

Sebastian was lying on the bed, fully dressed; he saw his mother come in, but did not rise, nor, for the moment, speak. The afternoon sun was flooding the room; the first thing she did was to pull down the blinds, very quietly. If he were ill, or in trouble, the dusk was best. Then she sat down by the bedside. She put an unaccustomed finger on his pulse, then her hand on his forehead.

"I'm not ill," he said.

"Thank God for that."

"I don't know how to tell you."

She found his hand again, and held it; it was very quiet in the room.

"I've made a hopeless muddle of everything."

"Not of everything, dear." How dear he was to her, how dear! She wished she could tell him.

"I meant to make you rich, it was never for myself I wanted money."

"I know."

"Now I can't see my way." He had rolled over on the pillow, discarding her hand, his voice came muffled. "Don't go away. I want to tell you. I never thought it possible anything could go wrong. Business was widening and broadening all the time. We had three hundred and seventy accounts in the pater's time; I've got nearly three thousand now. The new mills are finished, and I was right after all about the cornstalks, the pulp is the very thing for the feather-weight. We've worked it all up. Everything looked flourishing when I went away."

"What has happened, tell me?"

"Everything, the unexpected."

He got off the bed now, then sat down, weakly, on the side of it. "I have been fighting ill-luck ever since I came back; to-day has been simply awful. I could not stand the City any more, I came home. My head is only a machine for aching. I couldn't use it to think."

"How long have you been home?"

"About half an hour. Those blinds were a good idea of yours, I can bear it better now."

"Lie down again. I will bring you some phenacetin."

"What is the good of drugging myself, I've got to see it through. Mater, what a conceited young ass you must have thought me all the time!"

"I?"

"Well, it is the truth. I thought I knew a thousand times more than the pater, that I could keep on our specialities, run the agencies, manufacture the feather-weight, be independent of the Association. Nobody knew, or guessed, all that I was doing, not even in the office. Then came that breakdown of mine, and having to go away."

She sat quietly on in her chair by the bed. It was only money, he was not ill, that would have been unbearable.

"Cannot I help? There are still more securities, or they could be sold. There are Stella's, too. Stella would do anything for either of us."

"I am not going to drag anybody down with me, least of all you two. I wish now I had never touched your capital."

"What is mine is yours."

"You don't understand, mater. I'm up to my neck, I don't know where to turn. I had a mortgage on the mills, and the mortgagees have given notice to call it in. That was the first thing after I got to the City yesterday morning. I didn't tell you, I thought I could transfer it, I still think I can. Then you know we do a very big business with Hayling's firm; they've got some bills of ours——"

"But Mr. Hayling! surely Mr. Hayling would not press you?"

"He has a partner, a dead nailer. It looks as if they have got to know I am in a mess for money. Yet how could they have got to know? The raw material keeps pouring in, one thousand pounds' worth yesterday, and the shippers have drawn on us at sight. I had to get the money from somewhere, so I asked Bob's partner if he would renew one of our bills. But instead of doing it as a matter of course, he made a fuss about it. That funked me, mater. What could they have heard? Excepting to Pleasey, I haven't breathed a word how I was placed."

"You told Pleasey?"

"She wanted a pair of ear-rings she saw, old ones, Brazilian diamonds, she looked beautiful in them. I seem always to be saying 'No' to her. Poor girl! I had to explain I was in a tight place—it is rotten luck on her!"

Then the natural bent of his nature began to assert itself. His aching head had become easier in the quiet room, tea was brought to him. Depression, the imp that lies in ambush for all young optimists, had leaped on him, and fastened its claws in the softness of his mood. Now he made an effort to throw it off.

"It is over-trading, nothing worse than that. I am full up to the eyes with schemes and business; they are all good. I swear I have not made one mistake. I may have produced too much of the feather-weight, perhaps; but I can place that if I have time. It is only capital of which I am so desperately short. If I could get hold of twenty thousand pounds at once—even ten would tide me over. Do you know anybody with a liquid ten thousand?"

"Hilary St. Maur?" she suggested, after a moment's thought.

"He is chairman of the Mortgagee Association, and they would not want a registered debenture. Besides, no one on earth must know, it would be fatal. We should have all our creditors on us at once. Our agencies would be jeopardised. The whole position is critical, it is like a new business I have built up. If our competitors got to know the position we are in they could do us no end of harm. Credit is the very life of the concern, a breath on it spells ruin."

Something—she did not know what—prevented her, at that moment, uttering Joe Wallingford's name.

"Say something, even if it is only to tell me what an ass I have been, what an overwhelming, conceited fool! And yet, I have been right. I have got a twelfth of the whole trade of the United Kingdom; outside the newspapers, I mean, and wall paper trust. It is nothing going to break me now but want of capital."

Vanessa tried to follow him as he went into figures and calculations. He showed her that fortune waited for him, round the corner, and that only the obstructing void at the bank made it impossible to turn it. She believed in him implicitly, she said, and that raised his courage. They soon began to persuade each other that things must come right.

"How about Mr. Wallingford, Joe Wallingford?" She hesitated, but went on: "Would you mind his knowing? He is a good friend of mine, and of yours."

"He does a little with us. He would never do another stroke if he thought we were shaky."

"You wrong him there," she answered quickly. But he would not have it.

"I know him better than you do, mater. He will crow over me; he has always said I was going too fast. No! I won't have any interference from Wallingford."

If Stella were not so critical of Sebastian, so naturally satirical about his talents! She knew that whatever Stella had, she would lend to her, or to the boy.

"It all seemed to come over me at once. Panic is the word, I got into a panic. Quite a number of little things happened all at once. Spurlings cancelled an order, we made a big bad debt, one of our best travellers gave notice. I am getting better now, you have done me good. I'm afraid I frightened Pleasey's life out of her, coming in as I did. My head was splitting, I saw nothing but ruin before us. Rendall's in the Bankruptcy Court! I don't know what got hold of me. Suddenly everything went black."

"Pleasey was at home?"

"I met her in the hall. She was just going out, I talked blue ruin, wildly. I could hardly see to get upstairs, it was the worst sort of pain."

"She went out all the same?"

"I daresay she thought I would be best alone. You recollect the pater liked to be alone when he had his headaches?"

Had he? Had he? Memories, liked winged insects, set about her, stung her.

"Pleasey will not mind if we have got to pull in a bit. She has never had any money, she has often said she doesn't care about money. The way she buys things is nothing, she is like a child with a hole in its pocket. One gets that way if there has never been anything regular; it doesn't seem worth while to try and save on an income of a fiver to-day, and nothing to-morrow! You could help her more than you do, mater, help both of us."

He could not know how his mother felt toward the girl he had married.

"I know you have done a lot, the trousseau, and everything." Indeed Vanessa had paid, and paid, and paid, and yet heard Pleasey beg from Sebastian, humiliating both of them. "You have always been wonderful about money, it is that that breaks me—your great trust in me, the way you left everything in my hands, all that the pater meant for you. That is where I got frightened. Not that it isn't safe——"

His eyes sought hers, entreated her. "It is that that breaks me," he said, again. "I am in an awful funk, panic if you like to call it. I can't have muddled things past help, I can't have, Mumsy," the old name came to his lips, "tell me it is only this beastly headache. Things could not have looked so right, and suddenly gone so wrong. The stock is good, the book debts sound, the mortgage secured. . ."

How she wished she knew the language he was speaking! But her faith in him never wavered, and that steadied him again when the fresh paroxysm

had passed. He was only twenty-one, little more than a boy, and his responsibilities, of which he had been so proud, now crushed down upon him.

She lent him her strength and courage, they were his birthright, her calm certainty of faith in him soothed him, her capacity growing with his need.

He had worked himself into fever. It was with difficulty that she persuaded him presently to undress and go properly to bed. She said she would see Pleasey, and explain, she would undertake his wife should not be unduly alarmed about him. She even got him to swallow the cachet of phenacetin, she dared to tell him it was that, yet substituted veronal, a light sleeping powder. He must have rest, sleep. Meanwhile she must think, work for him, plan.

She had not got very far, either with working or planning, when Pleasey came home. The two ought not to have been together at such a juncture, it was too much to expect of any woman, even of Vanessa Rendall.

"I am sorry I'm late."

Pleasey glanced into the drawing-room, she was still in her afternoon clothes, looking very smart, the grub of Bice's governess had developed into a very butterfly as Sebastian's wife. It did not matter to her who paid for her clothes, or if they were unpaid for, so long as she got new clothes. She was greedy for them, she could never have enough, it was an obsession, ever growing, a very madness of greed. "I have had to try that *velours gris* of mine on to-day. I am tired to death. I stood for nearly an hour. You don't know how tall it makes me look! And now my waist is only eighteen and a half inches. Isn't that good news?"

"Sebastian has gone to bed with a headache," Vanessa began, coldly.

"A headache! How awful, poor darling! But we are going to the Alston's to-night. I told Mason," Mason was Vanessa's maid, "I told Mason to put out my mauve. I *wonder* whether you *would* lend me your amethysts? Sebastian will be all right after dinner, I suppose! It doesn't *begin* until ten; we needn't get there until half-past. I mean the amethyst necklace. But it would be *simply darling* of you, if I could have the brooches as well."

Vanessa kept herself fairly well in hand.

"He will be quite unable to go out to-night. He was ill when he came home this afternoon."

"Oh, yes, poor darling. I quite forgot." Pleasey was always vague about other people. "He said he had lost a lot of money, or something like that. But I knew about it all along, there is nothing new to-day, is there? I really *must* go, it's half-past seven now. Shall I dine in a tea-gown, and dress afterwards? Is Sebastian in the bedroom?"

"No, in his dressing-room."

"I'm so glad. I should have hated to disturb him. Bob said yesterday that he was looking seedy again."

Vanessa felt a little cold shiver; a chill.

"Bob?" she said, "Bob?" as if uncertain who the other meant.

"Bob Hayling. I had tea with him at the Carlton yesterday. He said Sebastian didn't seem like himself, as if married life was not agreeing with him!" She actually tittered. Vanessa's self-control was almost at breaking-point. "I said it was nothing to do with *me*; he was bothered about money, about not being able to meet some bills. I said that was all that was the matter with Sebastian."

"You told him that?"

Of course she had told him that, loosened the avalanche under which the boy lay crushed!

Vanessa could not speak for the moment, she was so overwhelmed by indignation, rage. And before words came, Pleasey had left the room.

She came down to dinner, when soup had been twenty minutes on the table, her lint hair admirably disposed, the amethyst brooch supporting a violet aigrette. She had on a white *crêpe-de-chîne* tea-gown, and another amethyst brooch held together the folds.

"I am *so* sorry I am late. Mason was *so* long over my hair, I told her you said I might have the brooches. You *did* say so, didn't you? I said she was to leave Sebastian *quite* alone until half-past nine. He will have had a good sleep by then. He can dress in half an hour."

"John," said Vanessa, dangerously calm, "tell Mason she is not to go near Mr. Sebastian, no one is to go near him. You understand?"

"Yes, 'm."

Pleasey looked up, she flushed a little, half opened her feeble mouth, as if to speak, thought better of it, and said nothing. From time to time, as that now silent dinner made its slow uncomfortable progress, she glanced surreptitiously at Vanessa's face, set, angry, or contemptuous, wholly uncongenial.

Vanessa could wait, now, until dessert was on the table, and the servants out of the room. Pleasey would not rebel against her ruling that Sebastian must be left undisturbed, she was as incapable of riot or rebellion as a sheep; she could scurry this way and that if she were prodded, but she could not butt back.

"You don't think Sebastian is really *ill?*" she asked, propitiatingly. "He was at the office all day. Bob said——"

"You met Mr. Hayling again to-day?"

"He motored me to Wimbledon. There was no harm in that, was there?"

"And did you tell him any more of your husband's secrets?"

"What do you mean?"

Then the storm broke, Vanessa could contain her feelings no longer. Perhaps much that she said was over-harsh, bearing in view that she had no argument to encounter, and no defence. Perhaps she might have omitted to remind her son's wife that, even as she had betrayed Sebastian's secrets to Robert Hayling, so had her mother ruined the diplomatic career of Ambrose Pleyden-Carr. Every biting word was true, that they sank into the nebulous resilience of Pleasey's consciousness stifled, without falsifying, them.

"He took you practically from the gutter, you were without clothes, or means, or character. He set you on the throne of his great heart, and you drum your light heels against it, like a ballet girl."

"You are very unkind." Pleasey soon began to sob. She dabbed her eyes with her lace-edged handkerchief. She looked to see if the black had come off her eyelashes. Even then she wondered feebly, how it was that *nobody could* invent an eyelash dye that was fast. "I don't know what I've done, you never did like me."

"Like you! Like you! Who could like you, except my poor besotted boy. What is there in you, or of you, to excite any emotion but contempt? You don't work with your hands, or brain, or heart. You cannot help having feeble brain power, and limited capacity of feeling, but you have hands! Mason takes hours a day mending your laces, your torn clothes that lie about your untidy room, putting ribbons into your extravagant, flimsy, underclothes. You give more trouble in this house than three decent women. You are disorderly in your habits, unprincipled in your extravagances, selfish to the last degree! Four or five solid hours every day

you spend before your glass! And what do you see there? A doll face, vacuous, not worth the labour you spend on its adornment."

"Sebastian thinks I am pretty."

"He also thinks you loyal, honest."

She dried her eyes, she tried to be indignant.

"What do you mean by honest? I—I won't be insulted.'

"You will listen until I have finished, you can think it over afterwards. I have had it in my mind ever since you have been in the house to show you to yourself as you are. There is such a thing as technical honesty, it is possible you have not yet transgressed its laws. But when your husband, who is also your benefactor, your protector, and your lover, is ill and in trouble, you spend his money recklessly, you go out to tea with his trade rival, all powdered and painted——"

"I don't paint, it isn't true, I don't."

"You are rouged, your lips are daubed with paste, your eyelashes are blacked. However slightly, and cleverly you do all these things in the long hours you devote to them, any intelligent person can see it is art, not nature, that supplies colour to your albinoism. You dally with this man in public places, betraying your husband's confidences, disloyal——"

"I did not know it was a secret that Sebastian was short of money. How should I know it was a secret? We were talking about those ear-rings. Mr. Hayling said he made *sure* Sebastian would have given them to me. I have never said a word against Sebastian, it is not true what you say of me. You have made me look a perfect sight, my eyes are all red. I don't know what the Alstons will think——"

"You will go to this ball!"

She was in a hurry to escape out of the room, she

had been in a hurry all the time. It was Pleasey's way, it was the Pleyden-Carrs' characteristic way, to hurry from unpleasantness, to hide it shakily, gloze it over, pretend it was not there.

"I am not sure now, I feel quite ill. I must go upstairs, you have been very unkind to me," she got away as soon as she could, holding her handkerchief to her smudged eyes.

But it was Vanessa who was the more shaken, the more agitated, by what had passed. Anger was so rare with her, hot, articulate anger like this had never before assailed her. It had overleaped the bounds of hospitality, of something more, of the respect that was due to Sebastian's wife, because she was his wife. Something of Vanessa's own self-respect suffered through her candour. Hatred was so rare, so unknown to her. Everything about her was black and bitter through its expression. She had darkened the waters of intercourse by this emission, and was ashamed, humiliated, unhappy.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was then Bice telephoned her mother was worse to-night, was desperately ill. Could Aunt Vanessa come over at once.

It was from herself that Vanessa was so glad to escape. She reiterated her orders that no one must disturb Mr. Sebastian. She could not bear to think she might have hurt him through his unworthy wife. She had never been so at war with herself, and uncertain. What good could her out-spoken comment do, save embitter future intercourse, make impossible that the lives of the three of them should be lived out together?

All those gulfs of silence between her and Stella were bridged, at last, to-night; speech flooded them.

Stella had gone to bed, early in the afternoon, and had awakened feeling faint; she thought she must be sinking! She had taken the tablet that lay on the table by her bedside, and scribbled on it in pencil—"Died at eight-forty, send for your aunt." And then had sunk back upon her pillows, and slept again. But Bice, never long away from the bedroom, had come in softly, and read the message. The next time Stella opened her eyes they fell upon Dr. Gifford and Vanessa, in bewilderment. There were twinkles in the doctor's eyes, but Vanessa and Bice were pale and apprehensive.

"Your message seems to have been a little premature," Dr. Gifford said. "I won't prescribe a

coffin this time. We will try some chicken, and a glass of champagne, instead."

"I wrote a note, didn't I?"

"You gave us the last bulletin."

"I must have felt very seedy. Poor Bice, poor Vanessa! But you knew it was not true, surely you could see for yourselves that I was not dead!"

Bice swallowed her tears, and felt she had been very stupid. She, too, had been going to the Alstons', and had already cancelled her appointment. Dr. Gifford enjoyed the joke, and promised Stella a long resuscitation. Later on, when the matter had been cleared up, and the momentary faintness explained, Stella and Vanessa united in persuading Bice to dress, and go out.

It was Stella who said, when they were alone:

"Pleasey and Sebastian are going, are they not?" and so loosed the flood-gates. But the stream came gradually, not all at once.

"Sebastian is not at all well. He is worried about things, over-worked."

Always the quicker-witted of the two, even if her quick wits were shallow, Stella asked:

"Worried in business?"

"You won't speak of it, I know. Yes, he is worried about business. He wants more capital. Stella, I wonder if you would mind? I have been thinking, these last few hours, that money father left, is ours absolutely. I have lent him some of mine, if you would do the same thing——?"

She expected ready response. As children she and Stella had held their goods in common. Now Stella's eyes puckered, and she answered nothing.

"There is not the least risk. I know my boy. He is marked for success. The machine is in a rut, money will give it the push it needs."

"But you know, you know as well as I do, that he should have it, if it were mine to give."

"Bice would——"

"Bice would give her soul for Sebastian; it isn't that. Don't you know, can't you guess? I haven't got it, I haven't got anything. Jack made away with it."

"But—but—" she was quite bewildered, "you have lived just the same."

Stella flushed painfully, she could not speak for a minute or two.

It had come, it had come at last. Now Vanessa must know. How could she make her understand, all her secret life, and the burden of it, all that her days had hidden, and that had eaten away her strength and courage? She had been silent, and silence had sapped slowly, like salt sea waves against her coast of life, lap, lap, in silence making inroad.

"You have never guessed?"

"I don't understand."

"I haven't anything; Jack left me without anything."

"Then, then——"

"Saighton has given me——"

"Don't say it——"

"All I needed. More, he would have given me so much more."

"It cannot be true. And I, knowing nothing."

"You wrote your books, you had your Sebastian. You have never known anything about real men and women."

It was earthquake shaking Vanessa's world, buildings were crumbling, landmarks disappearing, howling wind was in her ear, and the sound of many waters.

"You have not been his——"

"It doesn't matter what word you use. I don't know why you have never guessed it, I think all the world knows or guesses it, but you! Jack went away with another woman. I had a child I could

not keep, lonely days and nights. And I was only twenty-three. Don't go on being blind, and deaf, and dumb. Try and feel what other women suffer. I could not live alone, that was the beginning; I wanted love, I needed it. I took what was offered me. And you went on writing your books, not noticing anything. I have never been happy, not a day, not an hour. Look from you to me, and you will see."

And indeed there might have been years, instead of minutes, between them. Vanessa's face had grown a little hard these few months, and the lips were thinner, and tight. But still there were no wrinkles round her eyes. Stella's face was lined, and tired; all that had been beauty was soft and blurred, it was as a tale that had been told.

Quite suddenly tears rose in Vanessa's eyes, tears that could not fall. She stooped and kissed the dear tired face. They clung to each other a moment.

"You have had nothing out of life; I have had everything," were the words that broke forth involuntarily.

David's goodness, his generosity, Sebastian's school successes, happy hours with her pen, even her pleasures in prints, and china, rose in her mind. Stella had had nothing.

All these years Stella had kept a secret from her. And such a secret! That she had lived on Lord Saighton's bounty, been Lord Saighton's mistress—Vanessa's cheeks went hot with shame, she felt a terrible repulsion, at which she was even more terribly ashamed. Was it true that she was unlike other women, looked at such things from a different standpoint? Hilda de Cliffe had told her so. But Stella had not been happy, she had never been happy in it, and it was this that had aged her.

Now Stella began to talk, such sad talk! Vanessa

had, at last, a glimpse into Jack Ashton's conduct; a thrill of appreciation, understanding, came to her as she heard of Saighton's sympathy. Stella, so young and pretty, made for love and luxury, had been bereft of both.

"You were absorbed in your second book. The first had been well received. You told me, yourself, your whole life seemed to hang on making the second better, more worthy of father. You came to see me with your body, but your mind was in your library. And he was so good to me, so patient with me, unselfish, he has always been good to me. I wanted petting, he said, and he wanted to give it to me. There are some things you have never known. Petting is one of them, caresses, tenderness.... You have been a good mother, but you could not give even Sebastian what you never knew. You cannot see what Sebastian finds in Pleasey; it is what he has missed from you, the traffic of love, love's expression. Whether we are men or women, boys or girls, there are times when each of us wants the other, close, when we need a hand in our hand, a cheek upon our cheek, arms about each other; that is the half of life you have missed."

Now she threw aside the reticence of years. She told her listening, bewildered, unhappy sister, of all Lord Saighton had given up for her sake. Jack had had money from him again and again, threatening publicity, he, who had nothing to lose! Other politicians had had their careers ruined by women, dragging the women down with them when they fell. O'Shaugnessy and Fenwick were given as instances, and the names of the women were by-words. Saighton would never expose her to this, he had sacrificed everything to avoid it. She dwelt on his kindnesses, his devotion to her. Again and again she reverted to Vanessa's blindness, convicting her of lapses of interest, or carelessness of detail.

"You spoke sometimes of my extravagance, my flowers, or my tea-gowns. Did you really think they represented only five hundred pounds a year?"

"I did not think," Vanessa answered, humbly enough.

"You pride yourself on being a woman of the world. I have been away six or seven times every year. Do you think you can travel about, go to the best hotels, on five hundred pounds a year?"

Vanessa sat on as one half stunned. It was all unreal, it was something that must separate her from her sister. She could not hurt Stella, she could hurt no one again with bitter words that recoiled. But it was horrible, horrible! And then she reproached herself for intolerance, trying to put herself in the other's position, to recall her pleas. But Vanessa would never have done it, could never have done it. She thought of Joe Wallingford, flushed at the thought of Joe Wallingford. But she had not needed love or petting, she had been strong until now. Now she broke down a little, and cried, with her face against the pillow on which Stella lay.

Stella saw only her softening, thought only how well she had taken the story, how much better than had seemed possible.

It is easy to talk of conventional laws, to despise and belittle them. But these poor women who live outside the pale, live in a sad country. From their windows, every morning as they rise, they see loneliness and desolation, every wind that blows has menace in it, the wolves howl, and their security is threatened. Always, she had feared lest Vanessa should hear the howling of the wolves, and recognise in what country her sister had set up her tent. It had been always this fear that had lurked miserably on the cold threshold of her solitary hours. And now, at last, it was no longer there!

She talked, and talked, far into the night. The burden of it was that now she could get better, stronger, it was the secrecy from Vanessa that had been so wearing. Stella gave her sister a rare, occasional insight into wonderful moments. She wished Vanessa had known love. Vanessa could not bear that talk, her sensitiveness, perhaps a distant dawn of knowledge, shrank from it. There is no doubt Joe Wallingford was in her mind. She changed the subject.

Presently she found herself talking of Sebastian's wife, confessing her breakdown, not excusing it.

Stella's morality had inevitably suffered; she could not conceal that she thought Sebastian's wife would serve a phase for him. Vanessa knew that this was not Sebastian's way of love, but her sister could not credit him with his virtues of fidelity and continence, hereditary virtues.

"I know I said unjustifiable things to her. I am intolerant of her," Vanessa admitted.

"You don't understand what need of Sebastian's it is that she serves. You live in blinkers. She is an idle, unprincipled little thing, and he will outgrow her, but in the meantime, she is an improvement on the Princess. Leave them alone, and let him find her out for himself. From the first, I thought it could never answer for you to live together. Pleasey's extravagant habits are easy to understand, if you look at them sympathetically. If you have nothing, it is not worth while to try and save it! Until now she has never had anything, and as she has neither creed, nor conscience, now that the opportunity offers, she is snatching at anything she can get. But I thought Sebastian was doing so well—what has happened?"

Vanessa tried to explain the situation.

"Well, why doesn't your provincial millionaire come to the rescue? It is all that kind of man is

good for. Make him give Sebastian anything he wants."

"And cheat him of return?"

"Not necessarily, why not marry him? You cannot go on living with Sebastian and his wife. I would withdraw my opposition at once, if you would only tell me you have at last realised that you have missed something, and that Joe Wallingford can give it you."

"A hand in my hand, a cheek against my cheek," Vanessa quoted, jestingly, trying to take it lightly.

Stella answered:

"For me, for Sebastian, for Pleasey, for nearly everybody, love is vital to life. But not for you, perhaps; you are so strong, there is so little feminine about you. Perhaps you are the one exception, the one woman who can stand alone without feeling lonely. But, if so, don't be proud about it, be sorry. I have been wretched—but I have had my moments. You have only had pen and ink; rooms without flowers, days without sun. . . ."

Was it true, was it? She wondered all through that night. She was still wondering when the morning dawned.

* * * * *

She had gone into the boy's room when she got home; he was still sleeping, heavily, peacefully. She left the door open between them, watching him through the remaining few hours of that long night. Pleasey was late at the ball; Vanessa heard her come in, about three, she pictured her opera cloak lying about the hall, a glove dropped on the stairs. That is what Pleasey Pleyden-Carr had brought into their lives, frivolity, disorder, indifference.

And Stella! Vanessa could not yet think of

Stella, it was all pain and confusion there. She must believe it, bear it, bear with it. But she was mentally and morally, all bruised and tired. She could not think clearly, nor find solid foothold amid the ruins.

CHAPTER XXV

PLEASEY was later than ever next morning. She did not want to meet Vanessa, and sent down word that she was seedy, and would like a tray sent up to her. Sebastian told his mother that the "poor girl" had not got home until four. He had been up to see her, and had advised her to take the day in bed.

Sebastian felt better, in the morning things looked less black. He said he should get down early to the office, and see Robertson.

"Robertson?"

"An accountant, an awfully clear-headed fellow. He does our books. I know what he will say. He will want me to give up the manufacturing, get rid of the new mills altogether. He thinks he could get me an offer. All I've been working for must go by the board!"

"Let me see Mr. Wallingford."

"No! I would rather let everything go. I don't want any outsiders consulted, I'll get through in my own way, or not at all. Your money shall not be lost. I can always make an income. I wish I knew how Hayling heard we were short. And the curse of it is, the damned hard lines is, that if we liquidated, we could pay forty shillings in the pound, that everything is as right as rain. Except, perhaps, for the feather-weight, every ounce of stock is worth what it cost, or more. We are selling more hand-made than we sold in the pater's time; the two machines are working full time, and the travellers

are doing more turnover than ever. It is the curse of having to stick to the old tradition. I pay spot cash, and give twelve months credit."

He meant to say that is what he had started by doing! And yet it is not as if the boy had only talked. He had honestly worked like three ordinary men. He had often been out by eight o'clock in the morning, to return, utterly exhausted, twelve hours later. She did not know where lay the flaw; but all through breakfast, as all through last evening, and in the night, she remembered he was only one-and-twenty, and that Stella said he had missed something essential from her.

He *had* built up a large business. She watched his strained face, and knew that if the foundation was weak, and the building toppling, like Atlas, he would support it with his shoulders. But then she criticised the simile and found it jejune. She could not help her limitations. She was no more womanly than her daughter-in-law. Felicitous phrase-making occupied her, as making up her face occupied the other. Vanessa was entirely dissatisfied with herself this morning.

She went into the hall with her son to help him on with his coat, to try for a last word with which to comfort him. When he ran up once more to say good-bye to his wife, she waited for him.

Never inconsiderate or careless to her, he thanked her, when he came down again. "Don't you worry, old dear; you have helped me. You have been a brick, as usual. We shall pull through all right. Pleasey is going to Eastbourne, this afternoon, until Monday; she feels the strain. I told her to go, for I may be late all this week. You and I can talk things over again, this evening, after I have seen Robertson."

She was satisfied that she was to be spared

Pleasey's company? that for the next few days there would be breathing space. It was she the boy wanted, his mother, not his wife! How mean she was, and unworthy. She could not make peace with herself since that scene with Sebastian's wife.

Pleasey went off by the morning train, there was no meeting between them, and apparently nothing had been said to Sebastian.

Vanessa had lunch by herself. The relief of feeling there was no one for whom to wait, no late hurried entry to dread, no coat or furs strewn about the room, was like harbour after a tossing sea. Her writing-table tempted her, but it was too soon; life was pressing her too close, too insistently, she could not get back yet to the happy world of unreality, and brilliant, subtle, shadows. She prepared instead for an idle afternoon. Idleness with Vanessa meant needlework, a piece of embroidery, the regular stitch, stitch that left her free to dream. She sat over the drawing-room fire, the needlework in her hands, thinking; thinking only one thought. What had she missed; was it too late?

And Joe Wallingford thought he had stayed away from her quite long enough.

They had constantly exchanged letters, she had discouraged his visits. But now he had a legitimate business excuse for an interview. The Messina earthquake was but a few hours old. It was strange how insignificant it had been in face of her personal cares. But when Joe Wallingford was in the drawing-room, interfering between her and her needlework, bigger than ever, she found herself moved by his narration of the appalling calamity, lifted out of herself.

He had his special correspondent out there, his early wires had kept him on a level with the London papers. But he wanted detail, local colour, 'and she, he knew, was familiar with every rood of the

ground, could give life and substance to the leading articles. At first, for fully half an hour, it was only of the earthquake he talked.

But it must not be forgotten that he cared for her, that he had not seen her since Sebastian's marriage, that she was ever a woman whose subtlety lay only in her pen, who was easy to read.

Should she tell him he had been right about Sebastian's business difficulties, should she go behind her boy's wishes, and tell him of the need of further capital, should she confide in him? She counted her stitches, and talked of the earthquake, but this was at the back of her brain.

It was all taken out of her hands. He asked her, quite bluntly:

"What's the matter? What has happened since I was here last? Have you been ill?"

"No."

"Worried?"

"More or less." Her hands trembled, and she laid the work down. She was really glad to see him, to talk to him. He seemed so strong, and decided, so reliable. Perhaps he held the key to all her mysteries.

"Sebastian well?"

"Yes; somewhat over worked."

"Stella?"

"She is not in very good health, feeble rather."

"Worse than usual?"

"No—hardly."

"Well! if it isn't Stella, and it isn't Sebastian, it can only be—me!"

She laughed, it did her good to laugh.

"I really have not been worrying about you."

"Forgotten all about me?"

"I don't say that."

A slightly heightened colour encouraged him. He sat down beside her on the sofa. Although she

moved away from him, shrank a little into the corner, he spread himself at ease. Somehow, or other, it was impossible to explain his impression, but it was certainly there, he felt that her attitude was more favourable to him than it had ever been before; that her reluctance now was but the reluctance of habit; that she remembered he had kissed her, and had ceased to resent it, that she was really glad of his presence, and presently should tell him so.

"Will you have tea, whisky-and-soda, or a cigarette?"

"I would rather talk."

"The tea will not interfere with your conversation."

"You were angry with me the last time I was here?"

The colour was rather warm in her cheeks, but she felt a new uneasiness in his presence, a restlessness.

"Not very," she said, in a low voice, hardly realising what she was admitting.

She had had weeks of stress, of sinking her own individuality in that of other people's. Since last night she had known herself no longer indispensable to Stella's life, and that she had never filled it; she had been supplanted with Sebastian. It had been for them only she cared, and nothing could displace them with her. But it was good at such a moment to know herself first with some one.

And Joe Wallingford made no immediate capital out of her admission. He had a hundred things to tell her, interesting things, and she lost herself in them for a contented hour. Her personal perplexities had loomed large because she had ceased to compare them. Joe brought air into the close spaces of her narrowed days, a breath from the outer world, where great tragedies were being

enacted, and smaller international complications, yet made her own seem infinitesimal.

He talked of Austria and Servia, of the Sicilian earthquakes, of American promptitude in voting help, and something of little Italy in New York City. Then of the King's message to the Navy, the Government grant it suggested, of home politics, and the possibilities of a general election in the ensuing autumn, of his own seat, and what he hoped to do. It was a pleasant hour, giving her a sense of companionship, of mutual interests, if not of tastes. And when at length he came to the point, to close quarters, what he said seemed reasonable.

"Why should I have to come all the way from Workington to talk to you? Haven't you held out long enough? I told you from the beginning I was never going to take 'No' for an answer. Come; own you are hesitating, it is only the pluck to cross the line that you need. Put your foot over it, there is firm ground here."

"I want to be candid with you," she said, hesitatingly. "It—it tempts me."

"Well, succumb to temptation. This isn't one of those we pray against."

She laughed, as he meant her to. They were both standing up again now, on the rug, in front of the fire. She was older than she had been on the day that it had first come to him she was the woman for him, the day in the library at Seaton House. There was more grey in her hair, there were more lines in her face. But he was just as certain.

"Talk it over with me. Is it that I'm not refined enough for you, that you want a scholar?"

"It is nothing in you."

He put a tentative arm about her, and the flush mounted her cheek.

"You'll have to give yourself to me this time. You've come to the end of your excuses."

She watched herself to see if she resented the arm about her waist. Her colour rose, her pulses throbbed, but again there was no resentment in her.

"I am not going to press you." He saw the smile at the corner of her lips, the smile that died before it was born. "You say you don't like married life. And you've posed yourself cold"—the arm tightened. "I'll make you feel different. There's more than words bind a man and woman. I'll give you time, though the Lord knows you've had time enough. Will you marry me? I'll care for you, and hold you, I won't stand between you and him, nor between you and your sister; only don't set yourself against me."

She tried to disentangle herself from him.

"Let me speak, hear me. I like you, I have never liked any one better. But you are not really wooing a woman. It isn't in me to—to feel as you would have me. I am analysing it all the time, phrasing it."

"Not you. I know you better than you know yourself. I'll make you care." Both his arms were about her shoulders now, but he held her very gently, looking down at her from his height. He was outside himself, speaking words that in the dusk caressed her ears like warm gusts of wind.

"You've grown where you are, without ever having had a shoulder to lean on, or an arm that dared tighten about you. But that is what counts, when you're reckoning up." For a second he put his cheek against her soft one, hot, almost ashamed. "You've grown up without ever knowing it, and so, you are still a child. Love, it is love that fills the world. You talk of married life! You think you know married life, because you lived a few months, when you were a girl, with a man that didn't suit you. I know more than that; give me a chance to

show you. I don't know French nor German, but I know that if you're not as young as you were, you'll want the more care." Now he was really holding her to him, and she was leaning against him, a little glad of his size, and realising his gentleness. "I love you; it means a thousand things more than you dream of, it isn't in any of your books. I'll teach you something you have never felt, for all I'm uneducated. . . ."

A strange half-hour! Before it had ended he had gained his point, and she had promised that when Stella was better, when business was easy, and her boy happy, she would make venture with him, leaving the issue in his hands.

"You are taking all the risk," she told him. "I still do not think any woman who writes, and must write, is fit for married life. She only gives half herself, at best."

"I'll take the risk. A half's better than nothing, I'm grateful for half."

But she was disengenuous, and happier than she would admit, questioning herself, perhaps, still lagging on the threshold of a new kingdom, but not without the wish to enter. It had grown from shadowland to some dim brightness; now at least she had the curiosity, the desire to explore, to venture in.

Joe stayed with her until Sebastian came home. They had not dwelt on the topic, but he gathered the boy needed help. Sebastian looked pale, tired; but better than he had looked yesterday. At the moment, he resented Joe Wallingford's presence. He wanted Vanessa's sympathy, her entire attention, the restfulness that his mother alone could give him. And he was a little fearful lest she should have been talking of him, of his affairs, his confidence had been shaken since Hayling had queried the renewal of his bills.

"Had a good day?" she asked, making room for him on the sofa, settling the cushions.

"Not bad. I'm dog tired. Pleasey go off all right?"

"Yes, she went quite early; I think she must have caught the 11.40."

"Well, I'm glad of that, anyway. You heard of my marriage?" he asked Joe, after the usual greetings.

Joe said he had heard, and that it was wonderful good news, amazing news. His congratulations were unstinted, cordial. He said he must find him a proper wedding present.

"Where have you set up your tent?"

"We're living with the mater for the present, it was rather a sudden affair."

Vanessa supplied a lame explanation.

"And your wife?"

He heard that young Mrs. Rendall was delicate, had gone out of town for a few days. But from the moment of Sebastian's entry, the conversation grew a little strained, a little difficult.

It was an inspiration of Vanessa's to leave the boy with the millionaire after dinner, to hope —she hardly knew what. It would be wonderful if Sebastian could unbosom himself; she had faith in the older man's power. She truly believed that Sebastian was exaggerating the state of affairs in the City, and that the situation was bound to straighten itself out.

She made her excuses, saying she must see Stella before she went to bed. And Joe fell in quickly with her intention.

"If Mr. Rendall will let me, I would like to stay, and have a smoke with him," he said.

"I am bad company for anybody," Sebastian answered, almost ungraciously. "I've got a beast of a headache again. I shouldn't be surprised if I'm getting a tumour on the brain!"

"Humour?" she interjected, and got the smile from him for which she had tried.

"Well! I'll try not to make your headache worse," Joe said, good-humouredly. He had not heard, until an hour ago, that Sebastian had brought his bride to Harley Street. Was it this that had graven those lines on Vanessa's face, precipitated the cloud into her eyes? He would soon know.

He had tact, and definite intention. Sebastian had no arms against it. He was untowardly depressed, although his day of desperate work had not been fruitless.

Joe began by talking about cigarettes. After he had persuaded Sebastian to try a new variety, a wonderful, nerve soothing *Sandorides Lucana*, the boy's tongue became a little loosened. After all, any company was better than his own, just then. And he had always liked Joe Wallingford.

Joe felt the moment to be propitious, and he also knew he had waited long enough. He smoked, and he looked into the fire, dreaming happily, although dreaming had not hitherto been his way. Sebastian smoked, and thought of business, and incidentally of Joe's possibilities as a customer.

"I have been thinking of getting married, myself," Joe began, "you know, I suppose," smiling at him, "that I am fairly well-to-do."

"I don't know it through your orders to P. and A. Rendall," the boy answered, irritably, following his own line of thought. "You ought to have done your whole one-shilling series in that new feather-weight of mine. I relied on you using it, you told the mater it was a good idea, and you were interested in it; the books would have weighed nothing."

"I did consider it, but it took the illustrations very badly," Joe replied. He was startled by the sudden turn the conversation had taken, but not

entirely dissatisfied. It might make things easier, there was much he could put in the boy's way. He had many irons in the fire, and all these fires were lit, more or less, with paper. He wanted the boy to be reconciled to his mother's marriage. If this was the way to reconcile him, well! he was glad of the opportunity.

"Your first scheme was for only one illustration." Sebastian was full of his grievance, and went on airing it, "the title-page; and that could have been on art paper. I could have done you that at three-three farthings. You are paying more."

Joe was really entertained at Sebastian knowing so much about his business; he would not interrupt him.

"You go to Hayling for your office paper, and circulars, and to Seaton's for your sixpenny and one-shilling, you get the stuff for your newspapers from abroad. Come to talk business, I don't know why I haven't had a turn."

"I don't quite like the texture of your feather-weight. And you probably know, as well as I do, that there is no substance in it. It's too soft, and will fall to pieces if it is handled."

"Nobody reads the books twice; and if they do, they can buy a second copy."

"Yes, that's true. There is something in that."

"Not that I care. You can buy your paper where you like; it was you started the subject."

"I suppose you have placed the first run?"

"No, I haven't. There is between four and five thousand pounds locked up in the new boiler, the pulp, and all the experiments."

"Have you tried Drivers?"

"They are stocked, we filled them up in the spring."

Joe got up, and stretched himself. He would rather have got what he wanted by other means.

He had mis-read the boy, after all, and Sebastian sunk in his estimation. But it was the goal he was playing for, how he got there was of minor importance.

"I'll take all you have made off your hands if you like," he said. "You can invoice it to me. I'll use it for a spring number of the magazine, and print the advertisements and pictures on the art, as you suggest."

Sebastian sat upright, his pale face flushed.

"Will you really?" he said.

The relief was too great, too immediate. Joe's order meant the turning-point; he had, with almost inconceivable trouble, arranged the matter of the mortgage and to meet the bills in Hayling's hands. It all meant financing, and everywhere there was loss. He had given big discounts to get in cash, paying heavily for accommodation. He was almost in sight of land, but had shed sails, dropped valuable cargo overboard, seen himself seriously disabled in the process. Talking to Joe had been mere idleness, the salvage from the destruction that had been wrought.

Now here was an offer that made everything easier, that meant at least a respite, perhaps more. His eyes were bright on Joe as he sat up, and repeated his query:

"Do you mean it? Will you take all we have made?"

"I shall want quite that, I should think, if not more. I reckon to sell over two hundred and fifty thousand of the spring number," and he calculated the reamage.

The next half hour was occupied with detail; bulk, weight, and finish were discussed. Joe wanted to know how the new paper was maturing, the first sample he had seen had not impressed him. Then there was the question of guaranteeing dates

for delivery, and an undertaking there should be no variation in the repeats. It was impossible for Joe not to appreciate Sebastian's quickness and resource. And he dealt well. If Joe had not known beforehand, he would not have learnt from Sebastian, when price came to be considered, that it mattered in the least whether the transaction was cash or credit.

"Take your own time," he said cheerfully, when everything else had been settled; "we know the account is all right, and that is all P. and A. Rendall look to."

"Which reminds me," said Joe, perhaps with too obvious carelessness. "I said something to you about over-trading the last time I was in town. And you resented it. I don't want you to resent what I'm going to say now. About that order, of course, we pay cash for everything, and take all the discount we can get. But a rumour did reach me, some few weeks since, that cash was short with you——"

Sebastian was in arms at once.

"A trade *canard!* We've got unscrupulous competitors, like most people."

"Don't get mad. It is no secret that a business, expanding too quickly, sometimes gets too big for its capital. I like to have a good many irons in a good many fires. Could you pay a decent interest on a few thousand pounds? Say on twenty-five thousand pounds? Are you open?"

Nothing could have been put more carefully, more delicately. Sebastian, who saw himself, all at once, sailing into haven, sky blue, sun shining, all sails set, white and beautiful in the breeze, could only maintain his dignity by absolute silence. He had been through great stress; his natural buoyancy and optimism had had a shock that had sent both reeling, had almost submerged them. Now he had

to hold his breath; his equilibrium was established with difficulty.

"Well! you don't say yes? I am not proposing impossible terms; a small sleeping partnership, exclusive use of anything I want."

Considering the real position of affairs, Sebastian's self-possession under such circumstances must be considered remarkable.

"Rendalls never have had a partner who was not one of the family," he answered, with all the calm that he could command. "Rendall has succeeded Rendall since the first hand-made paper mill was put up in England."

Joe squared his shoulders. His smile was really attractive.

"Well! you know," he said, "that is part of my proposition. I propose to become one of the family."

CHAPTER XXVI

SEBASTIAN came into Vanessa's bedroom that night, after she had retired. He wanted to talk. As usual, he was slow in beginning. He played with the toilet things, he spoke disparagingly of the portraits of himself and Stella that stood upon the dressing-table; silver-framed, conspicuous. But he was a long time getting to what brought him here.

She tried to help him:

"Did Mr. Wallingford stay long after I went out?"

"Long enough."

"I had rather you put that photograph down; it is the only one I have of Stella in that particular pose, I don't want the glass broken."

"You have not got a photo of the pater here."

"He disliked having his portrait taken."

"I suppose Joe Wallingford has himself painted in oils?"

"I should not be surprised."

"He is not much to look at."

"Rather a fine man, in his way, I think. It is a rugged head, but full of power."

Sebastian fidgetted with the scent spray. The psychology of Sebastian, at the moment, seemed to Vanessa the most interesting thing in the world. What Joe had said to him, or he to Joe, what effect their talk would have on her own future, was very insignificant in comparison.

"You don't like him, I suppose?" He could not

get the stronger word over his lips. His mother could not be in love with the fellow!

"Yes, I do. I have always liked him."

There was a longer pause.

"I suppose I am a selfish beast. I can't bear the thought of this fellow in the pater's place."

"In a way, it would make things simpler."

"You mean in the City?"

"You could be working for yourself, not for me."

"That is just it; all the motive, all the heart would go out of it. I don't really care for money; what is the use of it to me? I have no time to spend it. I like the fight of it, and seeing Rendalls going up. But the real thing was making it for you, pouring it into your banking account, hearing you say, one day, you were glad I took it on, and that I was right in joining the pater! You have never quite said that."

"But you will be glad of Mr. Wallingford's help?"

"I shall simply hate it. You don't understand. I've been going through an awful time ever since I came back, worse than I can ever tell you. But still it was between you and me, and you stood by me. And I had begun to see my way. I meant to have told you about it to-night. I wanted you to give up this house for a year or two, live in the country; you could write as well, or better, in the country, Pleasey and I would have kept you from being dull. We could have managed on very little, say one thousand five hundred a year. You don't know how good the business really is, I went through it all with Robertson; he does the books for a number of other houses in our line. He thinks awfully well of the concern. It's—I'll give you a literary simile, and you'll see it better. It is like an extraordinary fertile country, only wanting irrigation; capital is the irrigation. I have been hoeing, digging, planting fields, when there was not enough water for those

already sown; in the result the crops were poor, uncertain, some failing altogether. But the land is rich, richer than the pater guessed, richer than any one knows but me——"

He walked about; she waited, patiently. She was in the midst of her night toilette. She looked in the glass now, as Pleasey looked so often, and she thought Mr. Wallingford's taste was not bad, after all. Her hair was thick and abundant, and everything about her fresh, natural, unstained by unguents; surely she was more worthy of all that Stella wished for her, than was Pleasey, whom Sebastian adored.

Then she said:

"But if Mr. Wallingford will do the irrigation?"

"The fun is gone, the savour out of everything. I was working for you, and I had found the way. It is only a question of saving, not spending too much either in business, or private, for a few years, rearranging the credits. Mater, when I came home to-day I was full of hope. I had worked it all out, I wanted to show you my papers, and the calculations. Then I found that fellow here. He gave me a good order. The feather-weight was my pet field, and he has opened the sluice-gate. But then he let this cataract loose on me. I—I don't like it. You are only doing it for me?"

"No."

"I know you are. If I thought you were doing it because you liked him, I'd put my feelings on one side. But I know what you do care about. *Me*, and Stella, your writing, buying those prints and things, doing your embroidery. It is not as if you had any temperament—even the pater wasn't—wasn't really necessary to you. You said yourself——"

Sebastian was very moved. He could not bear to think of his mother with a new husband, to

think of his father as replaced. He did not want Joe Wallingford's money flowing through his business. He wanted to build up, hold up, extend, push Rendalls, all by himself. The pride in it was rooted in him, as it had been in his father. But she was more tolerant of him than she had ever been of her husband. Rendalls had ceased to be contemptible since Sebastian spent his energies there.

"You would never have thought of doing it if I had not made this one mistake of over-trading. Give me another chance, mater, don't—" he turned his back so that she should not see his eyes— "don't desert a fellow."

She was greatly moved, the boy held the ultimate core of her heart, and it would never be different. What Joe offered her, tempted her with, left this untouched. If Sebastian had stopped then, had said no more, she would then and there have promised anything he asked, given up the kingdom into which she had glanced; it was still dim, and Joe's figure too large.

But now he began to speak again, of Pleasey, and of a new hope that had come to him.

"Mater, she is so young, in some ways. I want you to be with her. If it should happen to be a boy——"

She was incredulous, startled, irrationally angered. The words she had spoken crowded back upon her, more bitter now in their staleness. Perhaps Stella was right, all of them had been right, and she was unwomanly. It seemed an outrage that Pleasey should be the mother of Sebastian's son. No feeling stirred in her but anger. Yet she knew he was standing there, waiting for sympathy, expectant. Must she fail him? She made a strong effort, an effort that robbed her of eloquence, and she said, falteringly:

"That is great news. Is it certain?"

"Great, isn't it? We've always been pretty intimate, more than most mothers and sons, but this will make a difference——"

"You will want me less?"

"I shall understand you better. I know, even now, more of how I must have disappointed you than I ever did before. Already I want him to be something out of the way. I wish I could wipe out that bad time of mine. The pater would never have done the things I did. I wish he could think of me as I think of the pater."

"You have nothing with which to reproach yourself. I have had a better son than I deserved."

"You will like having a grandson?"

A hundred conflicting feelings took her conscience for battle ground, and fought silently. She saw she was disappointing him.

"You are glad about it, aren't you?"

"I think it is what your Aunt Stella says sometimes—I am not soft enough, feminine enough. I ought to be glad—but you are so young—it is another responsibility for you." She was floundering in words, and words were always so much to Vanessa.

"I like responsibility. And you will help us, won't you. Pleasey is frightfully excited about it."

She tried to tell him of her unkindness to his wife, but of that Sebastian was incredulous.

"Pleasey would have told me if she had thought anything of it. But she never said a word, she doesn't know how to bear malice. I daresay you have felt it, a sort of jealousy! It will be different now though! Mater, of course, we must call him David——"

"Or after your grandfather——"

"Well, you see I never knew him. But about Wallingford. This makes it impossible, doesn't it? That is why I told you to-night, although

Pleasey wanted it kept a secret. You will see her through, won't you? If I can get the money part right, you won't leave us."

"No."

He went on talking for some time. She answered him mechanically, the future had become darkened to her, and she must grope her way. He stood between her and her kingdom. But perhaps he was right, and Stella was right, and it was not her kingdom at all, but one set apart for other women, who had no gift of expression save this. They could express themselves in loving speeches and caresses. For her there was the pen. But to-night it seemed a dreary road she traversed, and even her boy was indistinct.

CHAPTER XXVII

It was agreed that Sebastian should tell Joe Wallingford he could not spare his mother. If it cost him the order for the feather-weight, dried up the source of that river of capital, the boy was prepared to face it. He was rather worried when the morning came, because he had no letter from his wife, but he had no doubt any longer of his capacity to meet the situation in Queen Victoria Street. The pendulum had swung out again, again optimism was the note. He had not forgotten his plans; the figures, and notes the accountant had prepared.

"We will put this house in the agents' hands, and let it furnished, just as it is."

She was quite as ready as he to do whatever was necessary, or advisable, but more ignorant as to how to proceed. They had carriages, and horses, motors, and men; it was difficult to rid herself quickly of her large establishment. She offered to send the curios to Christie's, to abandon china, prints, ivories, miniatures. She had no fear of what the world might say, and a passionate desire to get everything settled, to find herself again. It was he who understood that they must not manage affairs in this way, that they had more at stake than the few hundreds, or few thousands, such a sale might bring.

"You must not do that, you must not make any move that cannot be easily explained. To dismiss some of the servants, and let the house furnished,

is quite enough to begin with. We don't want to set the City talking, and have Rendalls in every one's mouth. We will have to keep the motor anyhow, you can't live in the country without a motor. You are not going to be a pauper, only to live on a smaller income for a year or two. You mustn't part with anything you care for, only just be without them for a bit. I wish Pleasey had written, I am afraid she is seedy. I shall run down myself if I don't hear by to-night. I wish now you or Bice had gone with her"

Vanessa offered, a little half-heartedly, to journey to Eastbourne. If only she had not been so outspoken that evening!

"I am sure she isn't ill," she said. "The Alston's dance knocked her up, perhaps, and those few words——"

"Oh! that is simply nonsense. Pleasey would not take anything you said badly, after all you've done. No, it is not that. I think I'll wire."

Vanessa undertook the wire, and to telephone the reply to him to the City. She did not want him to talk to her of Pleasey, she would rather he had spoken of Joe; she was interested as to what Joe Wallingford's attitude would be when Sebastian told him he would not hear of her re-marriage.

She need not have been anxious, Sebastian's decision would not affect Wallingford's, but that, of course, she only learnt later.

Joe came to the office in Queen Victoria Street soon after Sebastian arrived there. He saw no sign of difficulties, or lack of money. Sebastian, ostentatiously busy, perhaps a little dramatic, but that was instinct with him, was giving and taking orders through the telephone, dictating letters, an array of clerks waited instructions and signatures, the whole place was shiny with polished

mahogany and brass, on the surface everything reflected prosperity.

It was not in the boy to avoid posing to Joe, the older man could smile on it, since he did not know all that the pose concealed.

"Awfully good of you to come; get a chair for Mr. Wallingford, Haines. You'll excuse me, won't you, if I just finish off these letters, and set them all going? Everything is on my shoulders, we don't do a small trade here. Ever seen the telewriter at work? There it is, in the corner, this is my private instrument."

The machinisation of the business was really admirable, but a scrap of conversation, here and there, enlightened Joe, if he had needed enlightenment, as to the underlying weakness.

"Who? Draper. Oh, yes. Sell it him at cost, we must get in there at any price."

"Jones and Taylor. Tell them we'll hold it for them, they can call it up when they want it. Plenty of room at the mills."

As far as it went the boy was quite candid to Joe, after the clerks had left the room, when they were alone.

"I hate any one else to get an order. I would rather a thousand times *give* them the stuff, than hear of them going elsewhere, once we have got a foot in with a good firm. If I had enough capital at my back, I would undersell the whole market. And from mill wrapping, to best hand-made, I would sell at cost. Wouldn't the trade hum with me, you bet?"

"If you are really convinced that would be a wise plan, I don't think there need be any difficulty about capital," the other answered, quietly, meaningly.

That brought Sebastian up rather sharply, and he flushed.

"Oh! I say, that reminds me——" he began, but was interrupted by the buzz of the instrument on the table, "excuse me a minute."

"That you, Bob? Mr. Hayling out of town? What a bore. Where's he gone? Got a woman with him! Good for him. I wanted to speak to him about these bills. What the devil did he mean—— You! No thanks. I'll wait until Bob is through with his spree. So long." He hung up the telephone.

"You can't play the prude in the City," he explained, apologetically, "there is no real harm in Bob though he likes to pose as Don Juan. It is really about that stuff you said you'd take that I want to see him." He was uncomfortable, and a little embarrassed. "I believe you didn't really need it, you only wanted to do me a turn. It won't do, you know. There is no such thing as friendship in business. The mater made a mistake, we talked it out last night——"

"Oh! you talked it out last night?" Joe sat quiet for a minute; he was vexed, if not overwhelmed. This might mean delay, although nothing would alter his determination. But he would rather have had the boy with him, than against him; he had, perhaps, misunderstood him, he did not want to make another mistake.

"She doesn't want to do it," Sebastian went on, emphatic, though obscure. "It was only me she was thinking of, and Rendalls. I *am* short of cash, I'll go as far as that, I'll admit that, but nothing serious, nothing I can't get out of——"

"I never thought there was. I never doubted but that you were solvent."

"So you see——"

"I see no reason why you should refuse a good order."

"You mean——?"

"I mean I am going to print the autumn number on the feather-weight. Don't mix up one thing with another. Now this limited partnership, this twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"That is out of the question," he answered, shortly.

"Why?"

"I don't want it."

"Don't want to lay yourself under an obligation to me?"

"Something like that."

"You think I'd use the position to force your mother's hand?"

"Not exactly that."

"Then exactly what?"

Sebastian's discomfort passed away. After all, he had always liked the fellow, and the mater was not going to marry him. Sebastian grew his natural egotistic self under Joe's influence. He told him he was not afraid any longer of his "getting at" the mater, but he liked to be on his own; Rendalls was Rendalls, he did not want a partner in it.

"You are fighting against odds, when you might have the odds on your side; going into battle without ammunition, when the arsenal is stocked."

"You can pay too dear for ammunition. I have found that out already," the boy answered, ingenuously. He did not want to talk any more about "obligation," least of all did he want to talk about his mother. He wished Joe would stick to business; to further his wishes, he sent for the order clerk.

Joe saw samples of his purchase, and was satisfied as to its maturing. He was also shown the "heavily coated chromo," the imitation "art," produced by water finish, and the "highly glazed super calendered." Sebastian was proud of his extensive stock, and he did not get a customer like Joe Wallingford, every day in Queen Victoria Street.

He kept him talking, plying him ably. At last Joe rose to go. This was when the telephone rang again:

"Wait a second," said Sebastian; "I want to show you—— Yes, yes, I'm there, hurry up, we're Rendalls. Who are you? Oh! Good God! not Bob, not Bob! What! Where——"

He stood at the telephone, irresolutely, and with blanching cheeks.

"It is my friend Hayling, Bob Hayling. They have just heard he has had a motor smash, they say, they say——"

Clerk, Joe, office routine notwithstanding, Sebastian's eyes filled. "I must go round; he was such a good fellow, I can't believe it is hopeless."

But again the instrument was alive.

"You answer it, Haines, I am done for the minute. They say, they say it is . . . all over with him!" His eyes asked for sympathy, and his voice was husky.

"I'll get my hat," he said to Joe; "I daresay I seem an awful ass to you, but Bob and I, old Bob——" He was not ashamed to show his emotion. They had told him that Bob was hopelessly injured, and Bob had been his friend.

The clerk, secretly unsympathetic, for Hayling's firm had done them some nasty turns, held the receiver:

"It's Mrs. Rendall, sir, your mother. She says she would like to speak to you herself, she says it's very important."

Sebastian made an effort, and recovered himself. He took the receiver again:

"That you, mater? Like me to come home at once? Me! Why! what's the matter, you're not ill, are you? Blast it, they've cut us off. Are you there? Are you there? *Are* you there?"

The thing buzzed, but nothing came through.

Joe said:

"If she said she would like you to come straight home, what is the use of trying to get on, it only means delay, and more delay. We can get to Harley Street in fifteen minutes, if the roads are fairly clear."

Sebastian did not resent the "we," he was quite weak for the moment, full of apprehension.

"They will put us on again in a minute," he answered, uncertainly.

"It won't alter the fact she asked you to come straight home."

The men's eyes met. It is possible, in that moment, Sebastian forgot he had opposed his mother's re-marriage.

Joe hurried him into the car, gave his instructions.

"Perhaps it is Aunt Stella?"

"I hope so," Joe said, fervently. But he did not mean it, he did not know what he hoped, or feared, as they crawled through Cheapside, dashed along a side street, got held up in Holborn, and yet reached Harley Street within twenty minutes of that hasty summons.

Joe made no pretence of letting Sebastian go into the house alone. Sebastian was seized with a horrible fear, he was glad not to be alone. He had said half a dozen times, 'the mater must be all right,' he could swear it was her own voice he had heard. And yet he was white with fear, sick with fear.

Vanessa met them both in the hall; she, too, was glad of Joe's presence. That it was no light matter he saw in her eyes, and in the white set of her lips. And yet, it was rather rage, than grief, it was a whole tempest of feeling he read there. It was shipwreck and death to Sebastian; and Sebastian was the innermost core of her heart.

Of course there leapt from her to her son, intuition, a flash of knowledge. He held out his hands as if to ward it off:

"I can't bear it," he said, "mater, I can't bear it, it—it is Pleasey."

For half a second the hall went dark before his eyes, reeled about him.

"Be a man," Joe said. Joe kept him from falling.

"Bring him in here." The dining-room was quite near. Sebastian found it was steadier than the hall.

"Go on, drink it up." Joe made him swallow a liqueur glass of brandy, and that brought his colour back, and his full consciousness with it. Joe stood by his chair, Vanessa behind it; she did not know how to tell him her news.

"I'm better now," he said, "go on, what has happened to her? Don't keep me in suspense. What have you heard?"

"They must have been on the way to Folkestone," she hesitated.

"They!"

"Mr. Hayling was with her."

"Hayling?" He needed Joe's support, the dining-room was darker than the hall, and the beastly place swayed. He was very glad of Joe's arm.

Vanessa went on, she had to break it to him:

"They were motoring together, had been together all the time. There was a bad accident. Mr. Hayling was practically killed on the spot. It is in the papers already, that is why I asked you to come straight home."

"Pleasey?" his eyes implored her, he must have reassurance.

It was cruel of her to blurt out:

"What does it matter?"

Cruel, it was cruel of her, and yet she could not help it.

He put his hand on her dress.

"You didn't mean that, mater." His senses were coming back to him, and his manhood. "You don't know what you are saying. Why shouldn't they have been together. You dare not think——"

She knelt down by him, she could not bear to see his face, to add to what was written there.

"I don't think, I won't think. My son, my son, teach me to help you. What must we do?"

"I must get to her as quickly as possible. Let me see the paper, have you had a telegram? Wallingford will lend us his car. I don't know what came over me, what you have got hold of. Read it out."

She read it out, the brief newspaper account, shouted in the streets, justifying the early second edition. She heard them shouting even before the telegram had come for Sebastian, never connecting it with herself, never dreaming it was the knell of his happiness.

"Fatal motor accident. London gentleman killed on the spot. Chauffeur unconscious. Lady dragged from under car."

But she had more direct news than that. Pleasey had been taken to the Cottage Hospital, at Rye. She had been able to give her name and address, and the authorities had telegraphed to her husband, never heeding who she was with, nor why. And Vanessa had been on the telephone to them since she sent for Sebastian.

Vanessa had no pity for Pleasey, although she heard the shock had been severe, and that her courage had been great; nothing but indignation, too deep for words, and a great horror. Those hopes, those hopes that now would know no fruition; were they, too, part of the dissimulation that had been practised on her son! There was no room for pity, and now, at last, she was glad she had uttered those bitter words, even if they had precipitated the catastrophe.

But Sebastian would not listen, nor understand. The mere physical shock of the news of the accident, had shaken him, but he recovered quickly. He thrust right into the background anything surprising, or unexpected, in his wife having been motoring with Bob. They might have met at Eastbourne, why should she not drive with him to Folkestone? A hundred coincidences might have brought about their meeting. Once his brain had cleared, his loyalty stood firm, no shock could undermine that.

The accident had taken place between Winchelsea and Rye; he knew the place well. His head might still be swimming, and his legs unsteady, but what he wanted was an A B C.

"Will it be any quicker if I motor you down?" Joe said.

"You don't mean to say you are going?" she asked.

The boy's pallor now was indignant.

"The mater has got something in her head——"

Joe's eyes met Vanessa; they said as clearly as if they had been lips:

"This is not the moment . . . leave him alone. Let it come to him gradually, if it must come."

And for once Vanessa obeyed. She busied herself in getting wraps together, having a flask filled. None of them wanted to think; action is the only relief in such a crisis.

Bice, too, had seen the papers; now they heard her voice in the hall. And she was as staunch as Sebastian, although she knew Bob Hayling differently. She, too, wanted to go to Pleasey, was proud and touched that Sebastian asked it of her. Her mother was better this morning, well enough to be left; Aunt Vanessa could go round to her. Bice was as practical as Vanessa. It was quickly decided that train was easier, and more certain than motor. Mr. Wallingford would take them to Victoria; they had to hurry to catch the 12.14.

It was so completely taken out of Vanessa's hands that she could only move in one direction, ignore as they ignored, treat the accident as the beginning and end, what led to it of no moment. Again and again Sebastian made her repeat that Pleasey was not dangerously hurt, that the hospital people who telephoned had confirmed the telegram.

"Mr. Hayling killed. Chauffeur's injuries severe. Mrs. Rendall suffering shock." And this had been amplified verbally, but not altered.

"She is not seriously hurt," Vanessa repeated. "she has not broken anything, and is quite conscious."

She could not say more. She was overwhelmed at Sebastian's attitude. It was a relief when Joe had driven off with him and Bice. At the last moment, Sebastian called to her to have everything in readiness, he shouted, "I shall try to get her back here as quickly as possible. Ask Gifford to keep on the *qui vive*."

It was a relief to be left alone, not to have to feign interest in Pleasey's state.

CHAPTER XXVIII

VANESSA did not hear for some days that Pleasey's injuries were of a more serious nature than had been at first diagnosed, not in fact until the invalid was installed in those upstairs rooms, with a nurse and Dr. Gifford in attendance. If there had been an explanation between husband and wife, she was shut out of Sebastian's confidence, and heard nothing of it. That the boy was unhappy, desperately unhappy, his face showed, that his unhappiness was due alone to his wife's condition of health it was impossible to believe. For the first time in his life he wanted to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with his mother. In the evenings he sat in his wife's room, in the mornings he came down late, and hurried away to business.

People came and went in these strange days. The Pleyden-Carrs filled the house, taking their meals there as a matter of course, asking for perpetual brandies, or whiskies and sodas, "keeping up their strength," as they expressed it, talking disconnectedly of their troubles, dilating on Pleasey's beauty and virtue, for ever explaining, and explaining, that to which there was but one explanation. And they were doing it all so blunderingly, so badly! 'Mr. Hayling and Pleasey had been practically brought up together,' was their unnecessary story. They told lying, easily refuted anecdotes to prove the fraternal nature of the regard that existed between them. They made vague, unintentional

admissions of an intimacy that had warranted presents of jewellery, of clothes. They talked of Mr. Hayling's generosity to Ambrose Pleyden-Carr, and of the great loss he would be to them. Their wandering, unsteady eyes for ever questioned Vanessa, for ever answered the doubts she might have, for ever attempted to obtain some assurances that they, at least, should not lose, if Pleasey had made a mistake!

It came to that before the inquest on Robert Hayling was held. *"If Pleasey had made a mistake!"* The position was so inexplicable, they were so desperately frightened of having their daughter again on their hands. They feared lest her fine position, and the benefits that incidentally accrued to them, should be lost beyond recall. They could not rest away from Harley Street. Often they brought with them the idiot girl in the three-cornered hat; she was horribly like Pleasey, looking into the glass, making effort to attract attention from Sebastian, or from Dr. Gifford, or from any one who came to the house, unfortunate in the manner of her infirmity.

Vanessa tried again and again to get speech with Sebastian, but something had for the moment stifled their intimacy. She wanted to cry to him: "If I was harsh that morning, have I not been justified?" But he gave her no opening. Bice, too, who came in and out, for whom Pleasey asked continuously, had no reassurance for Vanessa; all her loyalty was up in arms for Pleasey, and all her sympathy was for Sebastian. Here, in her own house, Vanessa felt an intruder, or that they were all intruders. The position was grotesque and impossible; the presence of the Pleyden-Carrs, Sebastian's reticence, his unhappy face, younger, not older, in its misery, but shutting her out of his confidence. She guessed how it was, of course. Whether pleading

for herself, or in extenuation, his erring wife had repeated to Sebastian some of the phrases that she might have alleged had driven her forth! And he was aching to hear extenuation, to be deceived, to believe anything that could exonerate her.

"She was driven to it," he said, in one moment of revealing agony; "if she did anything that she should not, she was driven to it. You told her she was dragging me down, useless and unwelcome here, that she had ruined me by her extravagances—" And then he had got away. For his love of his mother warred with his love for his wife, and, painfully throbbing in his open wound, was an incredulous horror of unbelief that he had been so mistreated by the girl to whom he had given his love, and the name that had never been tarnished.

Joe Wallingford was invaluable to him at this juncture. Joe kept out of Vanessa's way, this was not his moment. But he saw that the Rendalls were properly represented at the inquest on Robert Hayling, and, in truth, that they had been well served beforehand.

The Pleyden-Carrs, Vanessa, Sebastian, himself, could hardly breathe until it was over, until they knew what must be said, and what might be reported. And in the end there was nothing to hurt them. The nature of accident was inquired into; the steep hill outside Hastings, the climb towards Winchelsea, the flock of sheep that caused the swerve, the quick descent, the impetus that flung Mr. Hayling from his seat; everything was described in detail. The chauffeur had recovered; his injuries had been greatly exaggerated. His evidence proved all that was necessary; it scarcely transpired that there had been a party of three. Good taste, good feeling, characterised the reports. Newspapers do these things sometimes, give up "good copy" to save a good name. There is freemasonry among reporters,

and among newspaper proprietors. Joe had never known his powers, nor used them, as he used them in the Rendall interest. It was doubtful if Vanessa knew what had been done for her, but Sebastian knew.

And Joe was not inactive, either, in the City. It got about, quite mysteriously, that Joe Wallingford was "backing" Rendalls. Without a shilling changing hands, nor any fresh capital introduced, difficulties melted away. And Joe learnt to appreciate the boy, whilst he helped him without touching his pride. It was really a big thing he had been laying out, showing invention, resource, energy, the highest order of business ability.

"When I first offered you that twenty-five thousand pounds, and asked if you would take me in, I admit it was for other than business reasons," Joe said, bluntly, some weeks later. "But, to-day, when I ask you again, it is only as one business man to another. I see a great future for Rendalls, a future in which I should be glad to share."

It seems strange, now, when "Rendalls, Ltd.," have stood the test of Stock Exchange valuation, and are quoted at four times their par value, to think that there should ever have been hesitation on one side, or another, over the amalgamation that presently took place. But this belongs to the region of history, rather than romance, and Sebastian's talents have received due recognition. For the moment, he was only glad that he had to work harder than ever, that he could throw off in Queen Victoria Street the troubles that lay in wait for him at home.

He knew it was with his wife that Bob had played Don Juan for the last time, and he was tortured by doubts and jealousy. And yet he could not part with her, nor condemn her. She was ill, she might never be well again, and between her and the world stood only himself. For better or worse he had taken her. But it was not that alone, it was that

there was no condemnation of her in him. She was weak, and the mater had been harsh to her. His soul was one white fire of love for both women who had betrayed him. He had his duty to both of them. But it was not duty that paralysed his tongue when he would tell Vanessa she must be hand in hand with him in helping his weak wife back to her place, and it was not duty that made him sit long, silent hours by Pleasey's difficult bedside. It was love.

As the weeks went by, and Pleasey grew no better, the agony of jealousy gave way to an almost equally unbearable pity. She had no one but him, he grudged the hours now, as they stole her from him, he remembered nothing but that he had always loved her.

It was Stella who advised Joe to wait no longer. The time seemed ripe, for the position in Harley Street must be intolerable, and the way out doubtful. Sebastian had set the seal on his condonation. It was still not clear what injuries Pleasey had sustained. But there she was, installed in his mother's house, new doctors being called in consultation, day and night nurses engaged to help her, everything that money could do, or science could suggest, surrounding her sick bed.

"I cannot keep Bice from going to her," Stella told Joe: "if Sebastian is satisfied, and Vanessa quiescent, they create a position we are bound to accept."

Bice knew nothing, suspected nothing, it was enough for her that Pleasey clung to her, that Sebastian said she was the only comfort he had.

No one could doubt Bice's devotion to Sebastian, call it by what name they would—cousinly love, or sisterly love, or sweetest love of all, the love that has friendship for its sound base, mutual intimacies for its brickwork, and for ornamentation, carven, imperishable moments of sympathy and tenderness.

Bice loved Sebastian this way, or the other. She vowed herself passionately to his service, even Stella went a little short of attention in those worst days of the illness.

It is possible that if Joe had been able to take immediate advantage of Stella's suggestion, if he had pressed home to Vanessa the expediency of getting away at once from her surroundings, and the ease with which she could accomplish it by means of a special license, and a commission to him to save her explanation or argument, he would have achieved his desire. For Vanessa was nearly at the end of her power of forbearance with all the Pleyden-Carrs.

She stayed away from the sick room, she could not find it in her to show sympathy with what lay there, and she was bitterly wounded and distressed at the estrangement between herself and her son. Self-reproach, the worst trouble of all, lay at the bottom of all her other troubles. Her feelings toward Pleasey never altered, were unalterable. But seeing, daily, what parents she had had, what upbringing, and example, she could not condemn as unreservedly as she would have liked. The girl had had little chance to live a decent life until her marriage. Then, what help or incentive had Vanessa given? She had met her with daily criticism, and harsh judgment. It was justified, it was justified, it was justified, she said to herself a dozen times a day, but never proved it. At the greatest time of need in his life she had failed her son. She knew it. And her eyes grew even as Stella's eyes, and burned behind their lids with hot, continuous tears, unshed, perhaps, but rising, rising in an ever-gathering tide.

She *might* have taken Joe Wallingford had he asked her then. There seemed no light in the horizon, and alone in the cold and dark, one grasps at any warm human hand. But Joe waited. And it was Sebastian's hand she felt at length, putting her

face down upon it, that the tears might flow, and wash away what had been between them.

That day yet another doctor had been called to say why Pleasey made no move toward recovery, what vital nerve had been attacked, why her strength ebbed, and ebbed, and what would be the end. And that verdict brought Sebastian to his mother when the house was all quiet, and the Pleyden-Carrs had borrowed their cab fare, and gone home with it, when dreary day was succeeded by dreary evening, and courage and patience were at their lowest ebb.

He came to her, as he had been wont to come to her, silent at first of what was nearest to him.

"Business is waking up," was the way he began, "they seem to have begun to believe in me again."

She was so glad of his presence here; she hardly dare answer lest the wrong words came.

"Money is coming in every day. Joe Wallingford's order for the feather-weight has practically cleared us."

"He—he was of use?"

"Rather"—and then a pause. "Mater, was I selfish in hating to see him in the governor's place? He is a good fellow, white all through. If—if you feel you could be happy with him——"

Sebastian stood up, he was leaning against the mantel-piece, those sad young eyes of his seemed to see more clearly than they had seen before. "I have filled up your house, you hate all the Pleyden-Carrs. You hate poor Pleasey! I want to speak to you about that. This is your house, and we are both here——"

"That is not fair, it is hardly fair. You know," she did not mind now if he saw her hot eyes, "it is the only comfort I have, that you should be here, that I see you daily."

"You heard what the doctors said?"

"Months, perhaps, even years!"

"Yes!" There was hopelessness in his acquiescence. "She can't get well, it is something to do with her spine. God!" he broke down for a minute, "how ghastly it is! living death, the first time she ever had a chance . . . and you, you sit and judge her!"

"She had been with him the whole three days."

"That makes no difference, it makes it worse for her. She has lost Bob, too. Who am I, that I should condemn her, or you? Nothing is as you see it, you criticised her all the time, and it was love she needed, poor little girl! I ought never to have brought her here. In your eyes she had a hundred little faults, and those were all you saw. But they were so unimportant to me. I never thought I had married a woman like you, strong, self-reliant, clever. I couldn't have done that. That was the charm, she leaned on me. Mater, she would have come more and more to lean on me. She wouldn't have told me lies, she would have understood in time that I loved her whatever she did. If she spent too much money, I would have earned it for her. You don't know how to care like I do. You said bitter things to her, she was lonely and frightened. And I was full of Queen Victoria Street. Bob had always been kind to her. She has told me everything. She went down to Eastbourne by herself, she was frightened to face you again, after all you said. She knew suddenly how you felt about her. Poor girl! And she thought of me; she did not want to tell me about you, and so come between us. She felt so lonely, she had no one to speak to. She wrote Bob, and asked him if she had said anything about me, about my affairs, she had not meant to harm me, and he was to promise her not to use it. Mater, she *was* getting to care for me. It was of me she was

thinking; and she was always sweet to me, always. She wrote from Eastbourne, and Bob drove down to reassure her. He was my best friend—neither of them meant to wrong me. You have the novelist's imagination; that is what has led you astray. And I have got to see too much through your eyes. If it had even been true. . . . what you think . . . and if," his voice sank, "if, afterwards, it was God speaking, I —I am silenced. Bob was on his way to Paris. We had all been the Folkestone part of the journey together. It was natural she should want to go over the old ground. He had not arranged to take the car to Paris, she was coming back to Eastbourne in it. You do believe this, don't you?"

What was she to say to him? He, too, flung it at her that she was a novelist first, and only a woman after that. Had she indeed wasted more than half her life, her heart divided. Novelist or mother, she must speak now. Nothing but truth could clear the clouds from between them, and let them see each other face to face.

"And if I cannot believe it?" she asked.

The young face was grey with unhappiness, but it was set on rigid lines.

"You must," he said, "you must."

"It will serve your purpose if I act as if I believed it."

"God! how hard you are, mater. Sometimes, lately, since I have grown so uncertain of myself, so unhappy, I have wondered. about the pater, and you. . . ."

"You think I—I failed him too?"

"No, no. Only that, perhaps, he missed it. I cannot quite explain myself. Loving any one as I love Pleasey, teaches one such a lot. If you have not ever felt just this love——"

The speech that came was not the one she meant to make:

"Whatever I have had, or missed, leaves the essentials unchanged, my hatred of unchastity——"

"Don't say it, mater, don't make things irrevocable between us. You have been good to me, if it has been from duty, as I sometimes thought, lately, or from ambition, where I have thwarted, or disappointed you, it hasn't seemed to matter until now. But now, if you care for me——"

It was hard, and difficult, after what he had said. For she had loved him always, had loved nothing so well, and he was questioning it. She told him that he wronged her, with quivering lips. It did not need many words. Then he was kneeling, with his face in her lap:

"Forgive me, I am more unhappy than words can say."

She put her lips a moment to the black hair.

"I will help you. You know I will help you."

"It must make no difference, even, even if it is all true. She—she's never going to get well."

"But if she does, if she does?"

"It would make no difference. She belongs to me, she gave herself to me. I swore to cherish her. I—I love her, nothing can alter it, nothing else matters."

"But years——"

He got up from his knees, the moment was over, was passed, but they were nearer to each other through it.

"You are going to say she may linger for years."

"Be a burden round your neck, between you and any other marriage, between you and such hopes as those of which you told me so proudly. Sons, to carry on the name——"

He burst out:

"My wife, she is my *wife*, young, and in such trouble! I pray to be able to help her. Do you know she calls my name night after night. The

nurse wakes me then, for she is frightened, terrified lest I turn against her. I wouldn't turn against her, if—if even I *knew* everything was true. You know I am right."

"All the hopes of your youth, all the joys of your manhood, your right of life——" It was almost a moan.

"She sleeps peacefully when I sit by her, she calls for me when she is in her worst pain. Mater," and the word was a cry, "I see you criticising me, judging, condemning both of us. I cannot bear it." And again he came over to her, sat down beside her, leant his head against her shoulder. "Be like other fellows' mothers for once. I am so done, so tired, so beat." She knew it was as Stella had said, he wanted tenderness, petting. And she took his hand, cold, not quite steady, in hers, she warmed it against her face.

* * * * *

It is not to be supposed her judgment went with her actions. She had to keep the love of her son. She went into the sick room that very evening, to make her peace with the invalid.

"Here is the mater," Sebastian announced. "She has been wanting to see you all these weeks, but the nurses make such a fuss about keeping you quiet."

It was not so difficult as Vanessa had feared. Without the paint, and without the powder, it was a puny face that lay on the pillow, the blue eyes larger than before, dull and pathetic, it was the face of a poor sinner.

"You have not been up to see me before," Pleasey complained.

"I did not know you would care to have me," Vanessa answered, quietly, laying an uncertain hand on the pillow.

"It is dull, lying here so many hours alone," the invalid answered, plaintively.

She had not grown more candid, she had known quite well why Vanessa stayed away.

"I am glad you have come now. It is lucky I am not disfigured, isn't it?" It was not she who had altered, it was Vanessa who must grow pitiful. "Dr. Gifford said to-day even illness did not make me look like other people." She looked to Sebastian for confirmation, and he lay down beside her, and took her in his arms, murmuring that she was more beautiful than ever, and dearer. Vanessa found it hard to bear, any mother would have found it hard to bear. But she won him, she won both of them.

Within a week, Pleasey would have no day without her, would be nursed, read to, comforted only by her mother-in-law. She clung to these two, their strength lifting her from where she had sunk. It was not in her to be grateful, really penitent, or ever frank, to face the future, or repent the past. She made many poor admissions, whenever pain, fatigue, or fear prompted her. But the truth was not in her. And perhaps it was best. For Sebastian had no wish to know anything but that his mother and he were united in their tendance.

"*Neither do I condemn thee; neither do I condemn thee!*" How often Vanessa said it, and it was never true. She would leave them together sometimes, when it became unbearable to think Sebastian's youth was to be spent at the feet of this violated shrine, this poor stale idol. She had to go through with her struggle alone.

But she did not misunderstand; she saw that he was growing all the time. He, who had been an egoist, now was proudest above all things when he alone could soothe poor Pleasey to sleep. He, who had been selfish, now found happiness when she kept him from work, and from play, chaining him to the close room. His heart was the heart of his father. What dumb distress fell upon Vanessa when she knew that

even so had David been to her, had her need been the same! And yet she could not even bear with him when he stumbled, or coughed. Father and son, she was unmeet for either of them! Not perhaps as Pleasey was unmeet, but yet unloving. It was retribution that she suffered. But in suffering she, too, grew slowly wise.

She would stay with them until the end, although again Joe urged his suit. He urged it too late; for, now, neither Pleasey nor Sebastian was willing to give her up.

"I like to know you are in the house when I am in the City, that if anything were wanted you are on the spot," Sebastian pleaded.

And Pleasey, too, put in her plaint:

"Are you going out? Don't go out when mother is here, she always wants something."

And, indeed, even the emergency bottle of brandy by the bedside was not safe when Mrs. Pleyden-Carr's emotion over her "dear daughter" became acute at sight of the spirit. "Don't let them bring Zuley up to see me; keep father downstairs."

Pleasey wanted none of her own people. She did not wish to hear their troubles, nor relieve them. She wanted to bask in comforts, with no thoughts for the morrow. She liked her lace and silk dressing-jackets, the peaches, and grapes, and flowers Sebastian sent home, the gold-backed hand-mirror Vanessa bought her to keep under her pillow. She was greedy of gauds that ceased to deck her, food for which she had small appetite, attentions of which she grew ever more exacting.

Vanessa saw all that. Bice and Sebastian only saw, and told each other, how bravely Pleasey bore her pain, how little querulous she was, or fearful.

Joe tried argument. He came to Vanessa, straight from the House, the day the Woman's Suffrage Bill had been read for the first time, and

the Government defeat made a general election imminent.

"Your word was as good as given to me," he said. "You promised that if the boy was satisfied, you would not keep me waiting any longer. The boy said to me only to-day: 'If it will make the mater happy, well, that is all I care for. She is being an angel to me, and to my poor girl, but I'll do without her, if she wants to go.'"

"He said that!"

"What have you got if you stay? She may linger for years——"

"Weeks, Dr. Gifford says, not even months. He thinks that none of the consultants they have called in have taken into consideration her feeble physique, bad family history, the rapidity with which one symptom follows another, and never a step gained."

"Well! and then, and then? What afterwards?"

"Comforting him a little, please God."

"But for you, for yourself? What are you going to get out of it?"

She smiled then. She was content since the old confidence was re-established between herself and Sebastian, happier, perhaps, than she had been since the tragedy of his marriage. She was helping him daily, hourly, and often he said a grateful, or a tender, word to her, a word that touched her more nearly than Joe's lovemaking, although that, too, was not unwelcome.

"I am getting a great deal, learning so many things I never knew before. I have missed what you would give me, do not think I underrate it any longer." She could blush, and she held out her hand to him, "you have taught me something, too."

"Let me teach you more."

"No, no, *no*. I have not really altered. Characters do not alter, they only develop. I want to write what I have learned, I shall write so much better

now, you know I shall write better, it is my mission, my only strength."

* * * * *

She had learnt a great deal; and further knowledge was not spared her. The thin tallow candle of poor Pleasey's life spluttered out, as Dr. Gifford had predicted, within a few short weeks. But it was in Bice's arms, not his mother's, that Sebastian found his chiefest comfort. Both of them cried for Pleasey, they sobbed out little stories of the courtship, and kissed, and cried, together. Vanessa was outside their tender reminiscences.

She comforted herself in her isolation, with the quotation:

"Who gives the best account of the feast?
He who has none, and enjoyed it least"

and started on her masterpiece, almost before the heavy scent of the funeral flowers had faded from the house.

And it proved her masterpiece. She *had* learnt something of human nature, and that paradoxes were not its expression. *"Earth's Crammed Full of Heaven"* was on a different plane to her other books, and the critics were able to praise it unreservedly.

What she found strange, overwhelming even, was that there was some savour lacking even in a literary success. It was absurd to feel lonely, and isolated from life, when a fourth edition was in the press! But the absurdity came to pass.

She had to admit as much to Joe Wallingford.

If he forced the syllogism home, in his own direct way, he at least took care that she was never able to completely controvert it. And the argument supplies the salt of their daily intercourse.

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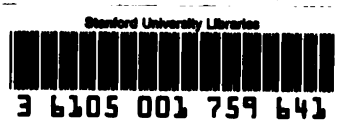
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